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THE BOY CHAMPION



BY
EDW. MILLERY

HE STOPPED AT THE SPRING, AND KNELT DOWN TO TAKE A DRINK. BEHIND HIM, LIKE HIS SHADOW, CROUCHED FEATHERWEIGHT.

The Boy Champion;

OR,

Dutch Herman of the Muskingum.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

CHAPTER I.

LIGHT, BUT LIVELY.

"Is it raally a fact, Fred Light, that you mean to leave us?"

"You can bet your sweet life on that, Cap! I told you, afore we floated out o' the Muskingum, that I was goin' to quit the flatboat business when we got to Cairo, and here we are, in sight o' that Promised Land."

The first speaker was a tall, gaunt, big-boned and red-faced man, part owner and sole manager of a large flatboat, or "broadhorn," that was slowly floating down the placid Ohio, and gradually nearing the point where that river empties into the swift and turbid Mississippi.

It was a pleasant and picturesque scene in the soft spring morning, as the sun was beginning to scatter the light clouds of mist that hung over the river and lent an enchantment to the leafy banks. A little way below lay the embryo city of Cairo, of which little could be seen save a few wharfboats and steamboats and flatboats at the levee, and that little was half obscured by the light fog.

"Cap" Sam Ryder stood on the levee steering-plank that crossed the curved roof of the broadhorn, managing the long sweep that was used as a rudder, and the side sweeps hung lazily in the water, like the wings of a swimming bird.

The second speaker was a young fellow, of sixteen or seventeen, to judge from his appearance, though he was certainly tall for his age. He was decidedly handsome, with bright blue eyes, light hair in short and crisp curls, and a face that was full of life and energy. As he stood on the roof near Sam Ryder, or walked over its curved surface, gazing down the river, every movement of his supple limbs and his lithe and graceful body spoke of trained strength and abundant activity. He was plainly but decently dressed, having "put on his pretties" for going ashore, and was entirely unincumbered by baggage, as he had left his working-clothes as a legacy to the flatboaters.

"I know you said so," said Sam Ryder; "but I was hopin' all along that you didn't really mean it."

"But I did mean it, Cap, and there's my skiff, that I brought along to take me ashore, towin' astern to prove it. I am goin' to strike out for myself, and make a spoon or spoil a horn."

"I'm keen to bet that you won't sp'ile a horn, Fred. The light-weight champion of the Muskingum Valley ain't a chap to be sneezed at, no matter where he goes, or what he goes at. But I'm sorry to lose you, my lad."

"And I am sorry to part from you, Cap; but I've got to strike out."

"Ven dot boy goes ashore," put in a third party, "I goes mit him."

The third party was a stolid, blue-eyed, heavy-looking German, somewhat under middle age, who sat on the steering-plank or 'bench,' smoking a long pipe.

"Why, Herman, what has got into you?" asked Sam Ryder.

"Nottings—dot is, nottings vot vas new. Vhere Fred Light goes, Herman Schweitopfel goes mit him."

"Have you asked Fred if he will take you ashore with him?"

"Of course he can go if he wants to," answered Fred. "I neither coax nor hinder him."

"Dot vas alles recht," grunted Herman.

In a little while the fog had lifted, showing the muddy bank of the Cairo levee, and the outlines of the buildings at the top of the slope, and Fred Light passed down to the stern of the broadhorn, and entered his neat little skiff, followed by Herman Schweitopfel.

"Gif me dose oars," said Herman, "and sit you in dot stern."

"Anythin' to please the child," replied Fred, and they said good-by to their friends, and Herman cast the skiff loose.

"Good luck to you, Fred," was the parting shout of Sam Ryder.

"Thank you, Cap. It will be as good as I can make it, you bet."

Herman's strong arms pulled the light skiff swiftly over the smooth surface of the water, and in a short time they reached the levee, landed, and dragged their skiff well up.

"Vhere vas you goin' now, Feddervate?" asked Herman.

"I reckon I will look in on the folks at the hotel. Come along, Herman. The skiff is safe enough."

At the hotel the entrance of Fred Light and his big tender did not create any special sensation, except as it afforded amusement to the clerk, who laughed as he pointed them out to a friend.

Fred stepped to the counter, and eyed that official as if he were some strange kind of caged animal.

"Are there any letters here for Frederick Light, Esquire?" he asked.

"Suppose there are," replied the clerk. "What of it?"

"If there are any, I want 'em."

"Are you the gentleman?" asked the clerk, with a peculiarly impertinent grin.

"I am that very gentleman," returned Fred, with an emphasis on the last word.

"Does the hotel have the honor of your custom, or shall I furnish you with a room?"

"Well, I might take a room. Have you got a parlor on the second floor, with a bridal-chamber and a private bath?"

"Oh, yes."

"That's just what I don't want, then. Have you got any room that you can let a feller have for two bits a day, and get his meals out?"

"No, we don't do business in that way. We have had enough of you, young chap. This is no place for loafers."

"What are you doin' here, then?"

"You impudent young puppy! Get out of here!"

"Get out yourself, you cross old yaller dog, that ain't decent enough to answer a civil question politely."

"Here, Tom! Bounce this vagabond!"

In response to the clerk's summons there came from a side room a medium-sized but muscular young man, who was evidently the porter of the hotel, and who was as evidently pleased at receiving an order to "bounce" somebody.

The clerk pointed at Fred Light and repeated the order to bounce him.

"This is a public house," replied Fred, "and I am behaving as well as you are, if not a leetle better. I will go out when I want to, not afore, and that chap can't bounce one inch of me."

The porter smiled at this reflection upon his prowess.

"Why, young feller," said he, "I can fling you out with one hand."

"You can't fling me one foot," retorted Fred, "and if you try it you will get hurt."

"You besser vas let dot boy alone," warned Herman, holding up his finger at the porter. "Dot vas der light-vate champion von der Muskingum walley."

"I'll champion him," snarled the porter, as he advanced upon the youth.

"Keep off, or you'll get hurt," cried Fred. "I am standin' on my rights, and I call you all to witness, gentlemen, that this is a clear case of self-defense."

The porter approached, and made a grab at him, but Fred, who had placed himself in a position of defense, quickly shot out his right hand and then his left, with a rapid one, two, countering upon each optic of his adversary, who clapped his hands upon his eyes, reeled and sunk helplessly to the floor.

"Hi, there!" shouted the clerk. "Call the barkeeper, and the head waiter, and everybody!"

Herman Schweitopfel reached over the counter, seized the clerk, and held him with a vise-like grasp.

"Aber if you makes anodder yell, I shakes you! Dot boy has got to haf fair play!"

The porter rose from the floor. He had underestimated the powers of his antagonist, but still believed in his own ability to cope with him. He put himself in a boxing attitude, and again advanced upon the youth. The encounter was witnessed by about two dozen men, guests of the hotel and others, and it was plain, from the interest with which they regarded Fred, that the boy would have fair play.

He had no difficulty in warding off the blows of the porter, whose eyes were somewhat the worse for wear, and gradually backed away, using his hands with admirable skill, until he was near the door. Then, seeming to conclude that there had been enough play, he launched out his left arm with the swiftness of lightning, and delivered such a blow on his adversary's right jaw, as fairly lifted him from his feet and landed him backward on the floor.

"If nobody else wants to bounce me," suggested Fred, "I will hunt a hotel where they have a gentleman for clerk."

No person offered to interfere with him, and he left the hotel, followed by Herman.

"I thought I knew that young chap," declared one of the spectators, "and now I am sure of it. He is Fred Light, the best fellow of his inches I know, who has cleaned out all the light weight men along the upper Ohio. They call him Featherweight up there. He ought to be a professional."

"He is a likely young fellow," averred another. "I wish I knew him."

"I suppose you can easily make his acquaintance if you want to."

The second speaker was a well-dressed man, stoutly built, but not portly, with a grayish beard and a determined cast of countenance, though the upper part of his face was shaded by the broad brim of his black felt hat. He hesitated a moment, and then quickly followed Fred Light and his companion out of the door.

Fred had gone but a few steps from the hotel when he heard a husky cough behind him, followed by a voice that was not quite so husky:

"Ah, Featherweight!"

He turned at the sound of the familiar name, and saw the gentleman who has just been partly described advancing with a smile on his face that was intended to conciliate.

"You see that I know your title," explained the latter. "I have heard of you before now, and am glad to see you. I was watching that little difficulty in the hotel, and meant to see that you had fair play."

"Much obliged," returned Fred; "but I reckon I would have pulled through."

"No doubt, my young friend; no doubt. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Creswell, Alfred Creswell, and I am in the cotton business at Memphis. Here is my card. As I said before, I am glad to meet you. Do you ever take anything to drink?"

"I have kept clear of it so far, sir, and expect to keep clear of it always."

"Quite right, my young friend. Glad to hear you say so. It would be better for us all if we should keep clear of it."

"My friend here, Herman Schweitopfel, does the drinking for this party of two, suggested Fred.

"Glad to hear it. Perhaps your friend will favor me by joining me in a social glass, and you'll have the kindness to look on."

"Dot vas alles recht," assented Herman, and they sought the nearest saloon.

When Herman had had his beer, and Mr. Creswell his whisky, the latter gentleman was by no means inclined to lose sight of his new friends, and he beckoned Fred Light aside.

"I want to speak to you about a little matter of business," he announced, "that may prove pleasant and profitable to you."

"Don't you want my friend to hear it?" asked Fred.

"Not just now. You may tell him about it afterward; if you see proper to do so."

"Very well. Don't bother us for a little while, Herman. Now, sir, fire ahead."

CHAPTER II. ANOTHER FRACAS.

"My young friend," Mr. Creswell began, "I don't know that I ever met a young fellow who struck me more favorably than you do. I like

your looks, your ways, and your style, generally, and would be glad to help you on in the world. I hope you have no objection to that?"

"Not a bit of it! I am keen to make a strike, and I want to push ahead."

"As I told you, my young friend, I am in the cotton business at Memphis, and I am a man of property and good position. I have an orphan niece, a young lady of nineteen and upward, who has been under my care since she lost her parents. In fact, I have been her guardian, actually, though not in law. She has had a good home with me, and has been treated as my own child.

"Lately she met a young man from Missouri—I think he is a railroad engineer, or a land agent, or something of the sort—to whom she took a great fancy. He kept hanging around her, though I warned him off, and at last he told me that he wanted to marry her. I shut down on that pretty solid, and he went up the river. I thought that settled the matter, but it didn't. The next thing I knew, the girl had run off."

"With the young feller?" asked Fred.

"Well, not exactly. Neither with him, nor to him, as far as I know. The young man don't seem to have had anything to do with the matter. But it was because of him that she ran away, and no doubt it was for the purpose of getting near him.

"I traced her to this town, and she is here now. She is biding on a store-boat at the landing here—a boat that is kept by a man who used to work for her father. She has no business in such a place as that, and she ought to go home."

"Why don't you take her home?"

"As she is of age, and I am not legally her guardian, the law will do nothing for me, and she is willful and stubborn. I must take her home by using some strategy and perhaps a little force. I want just such a young fellow as you to help me in this little matter. I could hire plenty of roughs about here; but they are not my style, and I don't want to have anything to do with them. I want some one in your line, a gentleman, who will do what is to be done in a gentlemanly way."

"Do you take me for a gentleman?" queried Fred.

"I do. You are a gentleman by nature, I am sure."

"If that is my style, I must try to live up to it. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get acquainted with the young lady, and coax her into a skiff some night and take her over to the Missouri shore, just below the point. If she won't be coaxed, you will have to take her in some other way. When you get her to Missouri, I will take charge of her and be responsible for her."

"What are you willin' to pay for that little job, sir?"

"I will pay you well for it," replied Mr. Creswell. "I will give you fifty dollars in cash as soon as you deliver her to me on the Missouri side."

He spoke as if he supposed that the mention of this amount would impress the youth as something magnificent; but fifty dollars was a

little thing compared with the sums that had filled the imagination of Fred Light as he floated down the Ohio, and he did not seem to be dazzled by the offer.

"That is a big pile of money for one night's easy work," suggested Mr. Creswell.

"It might be, and it mightn't," assured Fred.

"It might not be such an easy job, and there might be somethin' to do in advance of that night, and there might be some afterclaps. I reckon, Cap, that I'll have to squint around and look into the job, afore I go in."

Mr. Creswell's face fell. He had doubtless supposed that Featherweight would jump at his proposition.

"Very well. Satisfy yourself. But that is big pay, my lad."

"I don't say it ain't. Where is that tradin' boat?"

"You will find her at the landing. Her name is the Western World—a big name for such a shabby concern—and her proprietor is George Collis, a shady old fellow. He deals in faded dry goods, cheap whisky, and all sorts of rattle-traps."

"What is the young lady's name?"

"Sophie Creswell. Remember, my lad, that what is done must be done quickly, as I am here on expense, and my business is suffering, and I can't afford to take many chances. When you have made up your mind, come to me at the hotel. If I should be out, I will leave word for you at the office, and I will see to it that you are treated politely when you call."

"I ain't worryin' about those hotel chaps," replied Fred, somewhat scornfully.

"Good-morning, then, and I shall hope to hear from you soon."

"Good-morning, sir."

Mr. Creswell left the saloon, and Herman Schweitopfel came over to where his young friend was seated.

"Vot's der ragget?" he asked.

"Something queer, explained Fred. "I have struck a job already. I will tell you all about it after awhile; but I want to think it over a bit, and will go and sit down by the billiard-table yonder."

He took a seat near the billiard-table, but soon became deeply interested in the game which a tall and sprightly young man was playing against a short and stout opponent. Both were good players, but the sprightly young man was unusually skillful.

He noticed one of Fred Light's expressions of admiration at his play, and spoke to him.

"You seem to like the game," he remarked.

"I never would have thought that so much could be done with a few balls and a stick," answered Fred; "but I reckon it is easy enough when you get the hang of it."

"It is not such an easy thing to get the hang of it," responded the other.

Just then the attention of Featherweight, as well as of the billiard-players, was attracted to a fracas in the other portion of the saloon.

A large, rough-looking man, somewhat the worse for liquor, had entered the saloon, followed by three others, and the four ranged themselves up at the bar.

The leader of the party faced around, leaning

his elbows on the bar, with a hard sneer which indicated that he had arrived at the belligerent stage of intoxication.

"Drinks for the crowd," he commanded. "Whar's the loafers and the bummers?"

The only person within the range of his vision was Herman Schweitopfel, who sat near the wall, peaceably smoking his long pipe.

"Come up here, Dutchy," cried out the liberal individual. "Come up here and take a drink with Old Kaintuck."

"Yaw. Dat vas alles recht," replied Herman, as he rose and approached the bar, with his pipe in his hand. He called for lager, which was set before him, while the others chose much stronger beverages.

"What's that stuff?" demanded the man who called himself Kaintuck. "You don't drink that swill with this crowd."

"Den I don't drink mit dis growd," calmly returned Herman.

"Yes you do, and you don't drink that swill, neither."

"Dot vos no schwill; oond I drinks dot, oder I drinks nottings."

"You don't seem to know yourself this mornin', Dutchy. I tell you, Ballard county rules the roost jest now, and you're gwine to swaller a stiff horn of good old Kentucky whisky."

"Vishky?" contemptuously replied Herman. "I don't drinks no vishky. Dot vas goot only for loafers."

"Scuse me, gentlemen," said Kaintuck, turning to his friends. "I've got to knock some sense into this Dutchman. Sorry to 'sturb the harmony o' things, but it cain't be helped. Here, Dutchy, swaller this glass o' whisky right off, or you'll have to swaller a lickin'."

"Bah!" exclaimed Herman, as he turned on his heel. "You don't make no fools mit me."

Kaintuck reached out a broad hand, and knocked his pipe from his mouth to the floor.

Whoever supposed that the heavy, phlegmatic, and slow-motioned Teuton was not capable of taking care of himself, should have seen the suddenness with which his big fist shot out from his left shoulder, striking Kaintuck between the eyes, and sending him heavily to the floor.

While the Kentuckian was slowly regaining his feet, his three companions rushed upon the German.

It was this commotion that attracted the attention of Featherweight and the others.

Fred Light took in the situation at a glance. Springing to his feet, he ran to the assistance of his friend, quickly followed by the sprightly young man, and slowly by the others.

Herman was striking out right and left, defending himself in admirable style, and endeavoring to back against the wall; but, with one antagonist on each side, and a third gaining his rear, his position was anything but a favorable one.

Featherweight's appearance on the scene changed the face of affairs at once.

With a well-directed blow he dropped one of Herman's assailants upon the floor. Another he caught by the coat-collar, and, with a vigorous double twist of arm and leg, sent him spinning

into a corner, where he sat down, looking about as if he wondered what had happened to him.

Kaintuck, who had recovered his feet, reached behind him for his pistol, and his example was imitated by one of his companions.

"Stop that!" shouted the sprightly young man, and his voice was clear and shrill, with a ringing, metallic sound.

"Stop that! You've gone far enough. The first man who draws a knife or a pistol will have to settle with me. I'm the boss of this shebang—I, Dan Gilligan—and I bar all shooting and cutting here."

The hands that had sought pistols or knives were withdrawn from that search, and Kaintuck and his comrades clustered together near the door.

"If you want anything more out of these chaps in a fair fist fight," continued Gilligan, "take 't out of 'em. If you've had enough of that, go off and leave them. Do you hear me, Kaintuck?"

Kentuck, muttering something about a white man getting no show in that shebang, beckoned to his comrades, and they followed him out of the door.

"I'll be the death of that Dutchman yet," he growled, as he left the saloon.

"Does that scare you, partner?" asked Gilligan.

"Ach! nein!" replied Herman, as he picked up the remains of his pipe. "I makes nottings mit dose loafers."

"Consarn it!" exclaimed Fred Light. "It seems to be a mighty queer thing, Herman, that we can't go anywhere without kickin' up a fuss. Let's go and hunt a quiet place."

"All righd, Feddervate; aber ve don'd find dot place so easy."

CHAPTER III.

A SKIFF RACE.

"WAIT a minute, please," pleaded Gilligan, addressing himself to Fred Light. "I would like to say a few words to you in a friendly way."

The customary invitation to the bar followed, and Herman Schweitopfel absorbed a schooner of beer, while Fred Light excused himself as well as he could.

"What was that name your friend called you by just now?" asked Gilligan, turning to Fred when this ceremony was completed.

"Featherweight," replied the youth. "It is a sort of a nickname that some folks give me up the river."

"Yaw," remarked Herman. "Dot vas Fred Light, oond he vas called Feddervate because be vas been der light-vate champion for der Muskingum Walley, oond be knows how to use himself, you bet, by shimmery!"

"That's plain enough," admitted Gilligan. "I never saw a chap of his inches who knew better how to use himself. The way be dropped one of those loafers, and sent another spinning into the corner, was what I call scientific. I say, Featherweight, I wonder if you can row a boat?"

"I ought to," answered Fred, "as I've been at it since I was knee high to a grasshopper."

That is, I've been in the flatboat business, and I can send a skiff through the water pretty lively."

"That's the ticket. I know you've got the muscle, and believe you've got the wind, and if you can pull a good oar, you're all right. The point is this, Featherweight. I am in a sort of a hole to-day, and I believe you can help me out if you want to. There has been a good deal of talk here lately about rowing, and a man named Ben Springer, who lives at Caledonia, a few miles up the river, has been bluffing all hands. He claims that he can outpull any man in these parts, and it's a fact that he is no slouch, though I have seen better oarsmen. He was down here last week, drinking in my place, and making his brags. I got my Irish up, and bet him an even hundred dollars that I would find a man that would beat him in a row across the river and back, with working skiffs, and the race was to come off this afternoon. I picked Mike Brady as my man — Butterfly Brady, as we call him—a likely young chap, and Brady has been practicing, with good prospects. But last night he got a fall, and sprained his left wrist, and now he can't row a stroke. That puts me in a hole, as I said, and if you can help me out, I will try to make it worth your while."

"Do you think I stand a chance to beat Springer?" asked Fred.

"I believe you do. Anyhow, it is neck or nothing with me, and I wish you would make the trial. If you win, you shall have half of the hundred. I don't care about the money, but I do hate to be backed down."

"I will try," replied Featherweight, "and I reckon you won't be ashamed of me whether I win or lose."

"Come to dinner with me, then—you and your friend—and after dinner I would like to see you take a short pull in my skiff."

Fred assured his backer that his own skiff, which he was used to, would suit him better than anything that could be brought along.

"Two jobs already, Herman," said Featherweight, as they accompanied Gilligan to dinner.

"Dot vas beeg beezeiness, by shimmyn'! Vot you does mit dot oder shob, Feddervate?"

"I don't know whether I shall tackle that or not. I've got to turn it over."

Gilligan gave the two friends a good dinner, and at an early hour in the afternoon they went down to the levee, where Featherweight launched his skiff, and took a short spin on the smooth water of the placid Ohio. Gilligan's spirits rose as he watched the style and action of the young oarsman.

The race was to come off at three o'clock in the afternoon, and public interest in the event, which had waned after Butterfly Brady sprained his wrist, revived when it became known that Dan Gilligan had found another man to pit against the Caledonia sculler. There were many spectators on the levee, but the betting at the start was mostly in favor of Springer.

When Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel went down to the river, with Gilligan and a few of his friends, the lad was introduced to his antagonist, who was a tall and spare man, in some respects similar to the famous Josh Ward.

The contrast in the appearance of the two oarsmen was at once commented upon, and the verdict of the bystanders was generally quite unfavorable to Gilligan's side; but it occurred to Featherweight that Springer's long reach of arm although it might be greatly to his advantage in a shell boat and with long oars, would not be so likely to tell in his favor when he was using the short oars peculiar to Ohio River skiffs. The result of such a contest would depend upon muscle and staying ability.

As for Springer, he took the same view of his young opponent that was taken by the crowd.

"Why, bub," he said, good-humoredly. "I believe that I can row right over you."

"Then I must keep far enough ahead to be out of your way," laughingly replied Fred.

The boats were to start from a point just above a store-boat, and Fred noticed, rudely painted on the side of that ungainly craft, the words "Western World."

From the store-boat came a shabby-looking man, aged before his time, followed by a neatly-dressed young woman, whose face was covered with a vail.

The man took Fred's hand in his trembling grasp, and shook it fervently.

"Young feller," he said, "I've been durned fool enough to bet every cent I've got on Dan Gilligan's man, and if you're him, I hope to the eternal hurricanes that you'll win. My Sophie hopes so, too; don't you, Sophie?"

The young woman raised her vail, and disclosed to Fred Light a face of rare beauty.

"I hope that the lad will win," she responded, with a bright smile and in a sweet voice, "for your sake, Uncle George, and for his own."

"I will do my level best, miss, you may be sure," replied Fred, as he raised his hat.

"That is Sophie Creswell," he thought, "and the man is George Collis. Durned if I see my way clear to rakin' in that Memphis man's fifty slugs."

The boats were to cross the river, round a stake-boat that was anchored near the Kentucky shore, and return. As there was scarcely any current at the time, the course was a good one. The river was dotted with skiffs, and the number of spectators on the shore and on the boats at the levee had largely increased.

The two oarsmen threw off their coats, stepped into their boats, took their positions, and started together at the word.

Springer was slightly in the advance at the start, and seemed determined to maintain that advantage. As the skiffs flew away from the Illinois shore, the difference in the styles of the contestants was apparent. Springer rowed with as long a reach as his sculls would allow, bending forward, leaning backward and throwing all his force into the end of his stroke. Featherweight, on the contrary, sat erect, the movement of his body being much less than that of the other, and his strokes shorter and more rapid, but as regular as the motions of a steam-boat's paddle-wheels.

Dan Gilligan, who saw how much better adapted to a skiff was Featherweight's style than that of his opponent, was well pleased; but the majority of the spectators, although surprised at the lad's performance, perceived

that Springer was maintaining his lead, and were not disposed to bet against him.

"My man hasn't begun to put in his best licks," declared Gilligan. "He is waiting for Springer to pump himself out. Wait till they come back, and then talk."

As the oarsmen neared the Kentucky shore, it was easy enough to see, in the clear air of that climate, that Springer was keeping his lead, and some who were watching the race with glasses were sure that he was gaining. Gilligan, who probably had the best glass, said that his lad had slowed up as they came to the stake boat, to allow his opponent to go around it first so that there might be no danger of collision.

It was certain that Springer was the first to round the stake-boat, and Gilligan kept his glass at his eye for more than five minutes. Then he suddenly lowered it and began to take the bets that were offered on Springer.

The reason of his confidence was not evident to the other spectators until the oarsmen had reached the middle of the river on the back stretch. Then the cries of the men in boats told those on shore that a change was taking place in the positions of the contesting skiffs.

Soon it was plain to all that Featherweight was drawing ahead. His quick and regular stroke was more rapid than it had been, while Springer's long reach was growing slower and feebler.

"Your money is safe, old man," cried Gilligan to George Collis, who was watching the race with tremulous anxiety.

As they neared the shore it could be seen that Featherweight had increased his lead to a length, and a chorus of shouts and cheers went up from all the spectators, not excepting those who had invested their money in a sure thing by betting on the Caledonia oarsman.

The cheers seemed to inspire the lad, who made an extra spurt, and drove his skiff upon the levee, winning the race by at least two lengths.

He was almost lifted out of his skiff, though he needed no help. He was panting and bathed in perspiration, but otherwise seemed to be as fresh as when he started. But his tall antagonist was badly blown when he landed, and staggered as he stepped ashore.

As soon as Springer could recover his breath, he approached Featherweight, and held out his hand.

"I never thought I should live to be beat at my own trade by a boy," he spoke out. "But I don't bear you no grudge, young feller. I shell hev to go to you to larn how to row a skiff—that's all."

Gilligan and his friends piled their congratulations on the lad, and were ready to take him on their shoulders and carry him up the levee; but he was more interested in listening to the thanks of shaky George Collis.

"By the eturnal hurricanes!" exclaimed the old man. "I didn't think it was in ye to make such a pull as that, but ye did it, my brave lad, and ye've pulled me out of a bad place—blister my back if ye hain't! Glad to see ye down on my boat whenever ye feel like comin'. Thar she lies—the Western World. 'Tain't much of a

place, but ye'll be welcome, and heartily welcome. Won't he, Sophie?"

"He will be quite welcome," replied the young woman; but she did not raise her veil this time.

"I'll come, old man; I promise you that," and Fred raised his hat to Sophie Creswell.

Then he yielded to the entreaties of Dan Gilligan and his friends, who were anxious that further proceedings should be immediately adjourned to Gilligan's saloon.

"Dot's von shob mighty vell done, by shimminy!" asserted Herman to his friends, as they ascended the levee. "How about dot oder von, Feddervate?"

"I'll tell you how it is, Herman. I've a notion that the other job has taken a sort of a new twist on me."

CHAPTER IV.

SOPHIE RECEIVES A CALL.

FEATHERWEIGHT took little interest in the festivities at Gilligan's saloon, the chief of which were heavy drinking and loud talking, and he would have been glad to get rid of such lionizing as then fell to his lot.

But there was one little circumstance connected with these performances that enabled him to bear his part with patience.

Dan Gilligan became hilarious, and his natural good-humor overflowed to such an extent, that he took Featherweight aside, boasted of having gained no small amount of money by betting on the race, and doubled the fee that he had promised the lad.

With one hundred dollars in bills in his pocket, Fred Light watched his chance, slipped out of the saloon with Herman, and the two sought a restaurant, where they ordered their supper.

"That is doin' well enough for one day," declared Fred, as they sat down to a hearty supper. "It beats flatboatin'!"

"Dot vas goot, so far," admitted Herman. "How about dot oder shob?"

"I will tell you all about it," said Fred, and he related the particulars of his interview with Alfred Creswell, and that gentleman's offer.

"Aber you don't vant to be pootin' oop shobs on dot nice leedle gal vat schmiled so schweet?" remarked Herman.

"Of course I don't, and that man from Memphis will have to show a clean bill of health, as Sam Ryder used to say, afore he hires me to do such a job. I am going down to that store-boat after supper, as the old man asked me to come, and will try to find out something more about the business. You may go with me if you want to."

It was a little after dark when Featherweight and his friend walked down the levee to the store-boat, Western World, where they found the proprietor smoking his pipe alone.

The Western World, like other mud-turtle craft of its description, was simply a long box, built upon a flatboat, and was partitioned into two divisions. What may be called the forward part of the boat was used as a store, and the other and smaller portion was devoted to sleeping and cooking purposes. The store portion was rather scantly supplied with faded and shop-worn dry-goods notions, and the usual out-

fit of a small country store. In a corner was a little bar, behind which were arrayed a few bottles and glasses. It was easy to see that the old man was not likely to gain a fortune in his business, and that he was the best customer at his own bar. But he had no rent or license to pay, and that was something in his favor.

He welcomed Featherweight and Herman as heartily as his shaky condition would permit, and at once proceeded to do the hospitable thing by hobbling behind his bar and inviting them to drink. Fred was obliged to make his usual excuses, and Herman, finding none of his favorite beverage at hand, was not inclined to sample George Collis's stock of liquors.

"By the eternal hurricanes!" exclaimed the old man, whose weak voice was hardly suited to his strong expressions. "You two are a queer lot, but ye're welcome to have yer own way, shiver my skull if ye ain't! That was a big thing ye did to-day with the oars, young feller, and ye saved old George Collis his little pile, and I'm thankful to ye for it, spatter my brains if I hain't!—and so's my Sophie."

"I don't see the young lady here," remarked Fred.

"Oh, she don't show up much in this part of the boat; but she'll come out to see you'ns, cut me inter ribbons if she won't!"

The old man partly opened the inner door.

"Do come out, Miss Sophie," he said, "and see the young feller that rowed the race to-day, and that saved old George's money."

"Of course I will come," responded a sweet voice, and the young lady came out into the store.

"I reckon it's time to shut up shop, anyhow," remarked the old man, as he closed and bolted the outer door.

By the light of the oil lamp, her vail having been laid aside, the young lady presented even a more attractive appearance than in the afternoon. She was of the medium height, perfectly formed, with dark hair and eyes, an oval face, and a peach-bloom complexion. Her bright smile seemed to light up the dingy room, and her voice was melody itself.

The old man came forward to perform the ceremony of introduction.

"This young feller," he said, "is Mr. Featherweight. Anyhow, that's the name I heerd to-day."

"That is a sort of a nickname," suggested the lad. "My real name is Fred Light. And this is Miss Sophie Creswell, and I'm right glad to meet her."

The old man actually turned blue, and the young lady started, uttering a slight exclamation of fear.

"Do you know me, sir?" she asked.

"Never saw you until this afternoon," replied Fred, "but I have heard of you."

"That name hain't been spoken anywhar off this boat, by the great jumpin' Jupiter!" exclaimed the old man.

"I heard it this mornin' for the first time," explained Fred, "and I have come down here this evenin', Miss Creswell, to have a talk with you. I reckon I may as well say what I have to say afore present company, as this old man, I suppose, is a true friend of yours, and as my

friend is one I can bet on. Sit down, please, and don't be the least bit uneasy."

Miss Creswell took a seat, and Featherweight seated himself near her.

"I landed here this mornin'," he said, "and I hadn't been in town an hour when I met an uncle of yours."

"My uncle Alfred?" she asked, turning pale.

"That's the man—Alfred Creswell, of Memphis, in the cotton business. He said that he took a notion to me, because of a little difficulty I had up at the hotel, and he allowed that I was the sort of chap he wanted for a job he had on hand. He told me about you, and offered to hire me to sneak you off from this boat, or take you off by force, and run you over to Missouri, where he could get hold of you and take you back to Memphis. He said he was willin' to give me fifty dollars for that bit of business."

"And did you think," she indignantly asked, "that fifty dollars would pay you for such an infamous act?"

"Well, Miss Creswell, I told him that the pile wasn't such a mighty big one, and said that I meant to come down here afore strikin' a bargain, to look around and see if the job wasn't worth more."

The young lady rose from her seat.

"Of all the cool pieces of impudence that I ever heard of," she said, "this is the worst! Do you really have the assurance to say that you have come here to-night for the purpose of looking around and measuring the value in money of such an outrageous attempt against an unfortunate and defenseless girl? If you do, you must be a great fool or a great scoundrel!"

"I doubt if I am either," replied Featherweight. "I don't quite take in all you say, Miss Creswell, but I reckon I can hit off your meanin'. You are right as far as you go, but you hain't heard the whole story yet. I had my doubts about the job bein' the right sort, and when I heard you speak this afternoon, just afore the race, I knew that it wouldn't do at all. I tell you, old man," continued the lad, turning to George Collis, "when she said that she wanted me to win, I felt dead sure of beatin' that long-legged chap. The fact is, Miss Creswell, that I didn't like your uncle's style as well as he seemed to like mine, and didn't cotton at all to what he said about you. He told me that you had run away from home to meet a young man."

"That was false," declared Sophie, with a blush. "I left my uncle's house, not only because I was thwarted in the dearest wish of my heart, but because I was ill-treated in every way, and because my dead mother was slandered, and the memory of my father was insulted."

"Good enough reasons, too, by the eternal hurricanes!" supplemented the old man. "And she came to poor old George Collis, because she hadn't nowhar else on earth to go to."

"You are an orphan, then, Miss Creswell?" remarked Featherweight.

"I was with my poor mother at her death, but I do not know when or where my father died. My uncle has told me that he is dead, and that is all I know about it."

"Well, Miss Creswell, I will have to let his

job slide, because it won't pay at the price. But, I am afraid that I must run you off, all the same."

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"Why, if I don't do it, somebody else will. Your uncle says that he can hire plenty of roughs about here, and I don't doubt he can. After I go back on him, you won't be safe here a night."

"They'd better not come here, by the thunderin' airthquakes!" cried the old man. "Old George Collis ain't a giant, but he knows how to take keer of himself. Let 'em step a foot inside o' that door, and I'll turn the fizziculator loose on 'em."

Featherweight suggested that the fizziculator, whatever it was, might not be able to do the job. It seemed to him that the young lady had better make her escape while she could, and that the only question was, where should she go to?

"Wasn't there some such a young man as your uncle spoke about?" he asked—"a man from Missouri?"

"The young man of whom he spoke lives in Missouri," she answered.

"Far from here?"

"Not very far, I believe; but I do not know exactly where."

"What is his name?"

"Frank Mallory, and he has something to do with land-surveying."

"I reckon we can find him, if you ain't afraid to trust yourself with me. But you can settle that p'int at another time. Just now the question with me is, whether I ought to tell that uncle of yours that I've gone back on his job."

"Will not that make him angry?" asked Sophie.

"Like enough it might. But he's got to get angry some time."

"What do you want to tell him for?" asked George Collis. "Let him slide!"

"The fact is, old man, that I like to give everybody a square deal, no matter what kind of a game they play, and I promised to let him know. A promise is a promise; ain't it, Herman?"

"Dot vas alles recht," replied Herman, who had been content to sit and gaze at Sophie Creswell. "Dot boy, mine frients, keeps him der head lefel all der vile oond der heart in dot right place, yoost so mooch as nefer vas."

"Thank you, Herman. If you say so, we will trot up to the hotel now, and will say good-evening to Miss Creswell and Mr. Collis. I reckon you will see us back here afore along, folks, if the man from Memphis don't bite my head off, and I will try to keep it out of his jaws."

CHAPTER V.

THE WRATH OF THE MAN FROM MEMPHIS.

AT the hotel, Featherweight found the clerk not only polite, but affable, and all the officials and underlings disposed to make themselves agreeable. Even the porter with whom he had a collision in the morning, stepped forward with a smiling face and an outstretched hand:

"I don't hold any grudge," said he, "and I hope you don't."

"Not a bit of it," replied Fred.

He wondered whether all this friendly feeling was caused by his performance at the boat-race in the afternoon, or by the influence of Alfred Creswell. On the whole, he little cared what caused it.

The clerk told him that Mr. Creswell was in his room, and had left orders that "Mr. Light" should be sent up at once if he should call.

"Will you wait here for me a little while, Herman?" asked Fred.

"Mebbe I vaits," replied the German, aloud. "Mebbe I don't vaits," he said to himself.

Featherweight followed a bell-boy up-stairs, and was ushered into Mr. Creswell's room. It was an apartment of good size, and appeared to be connected with a room on each side of it; but the doors of these rooms were closed. The man from Memphis was alone, and the attempted smile with which he greeted the lad was a cross between a grin and a snarl.

"Here you are, my young friend," he said. "I am glad to see you at last. I had expected you to come sooner; but the boat-race this afternoon took much of your time, I suppose. Better late than never, though, and I hope you have made up your mind about that little affair of mine. Are you ready to go to work; and does the price suit you?"

"The price don't suit," replied Fred.

"How much do you want, then? Speak up. I don't like to haggle."

"Just nothing at all, Mr. Creswell. No money would pay me to take hold of such a job, and I don't mean to do it."

Mr. Creswell's face turned livid, and his burly form shook with rage. If he had counted on the possibility of Fred's refusal, he had surely not discounted it.

"Why, you young scorpion!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean? Do you know what you are saying? Do you think that I will allow you to play with me in that style?"

"I ain't playin' with you, mister," replied Featherweight.

"You are trying to strike me for more money. That is what is the matter with you. How much do you want, then? Spit it out. Don't be modest about it."

"I don't want a cent from you, sir, and I won't move a finger to worry that young lady!"

"Mighty fine. And so, after you have crept into my confidence, and have found out all about my plans, you think you can turn around and betray me."

"I never asked you to tell me anythin'," replied the lad. "You did it of your own accord."

"But you listened, and you took it all in, and you made no objection, except to the price. I suppose, now, that you have seen that girl, and that she has talked you over, and that you have told her all you had learned from me. Is that so?"

Fred Light's face flushed, and it was evident that his patience had about reached its limit.

"I won't answer any more questions," he said, "until you can ask them as a gentleman ought to. I didn't need to come up here and tell you what I had made up my mind to; but I always want to give everybody a square deal. I have done the fair thing, and now I will go."

"You will, will you?" exclaimed Mr. Creswell. "I will see about that, my lad. As you refuse to help me, I mean that you shall not harm me."

He stepped quickly to the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Featherweight.

"I mean what I just said. My plans shall not be spoiled by such a whiffet as you."

"You had better not be so brash," said Fred, with a contemptuous smile. "I may be a whiffet, but it won't do for a man of your style to fool with me too far."

The man from Memphis responded to this defiance by clapping his hands. Instantly one of the side doors of the apartment was opened, and in poured Kaintuck and the three men whom Fred had met at Gilligan's saloon in the morning.

"Now you know what I mean," said Mr. Creswell. "I suspected that you wanted to play some such trick as this, and I was ready for you."

Featherweight had backed into a corner, where he stood like a young lion at bay.

"So you fixed up this game to double-bank me," he said. "Go your length, then, and see where you will bring up."

"Seize that young rascal, and tie and gag him," ordered the man from Memphis, and Kaintuck and his comrades, grinning as if the task suited their taste, threw themselves upon the lad.

He felled the first with a blow straight from the shoulder, and saluted another with a kick in the stomach that doubled him up. But the two remaining men piled themselves upon him, backed by Alfred Creswell, and he was thrown upon the floor in spite of his violent struggles.

At that instant the door of the adjoining apartment flew open with a crash, and a tall young man bounded into the room, with a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Hands off, you scoundrels!" he shouted. "Touch that boy again, and I will make dog's meat of every mother's son of you!"

"Frank Mallory!" exclaimed Alfred Creswell, shrinking back as he looked up.

The next moment Herman Schweitopf pushed in through the door that had been broken open.

"I don't vas gone avay yoost yet, all der vile," he remarked. "Oond here vas dose loafers some more, by shimmey!"

Kaintuck and his comrades let Featherweight loose, and backed away before the determined appearance of Frank Mallory, the fighting attitude of Herman, and the fierce looks of the lad, who had risen to his feet, ready to renew the conflict.

"Clear out!" ordered Mallory. "Clear out, every rascal of you! I've half a mind to blow a hole through one or two of you, to teach you manners."

Kaintuck and his partners sneaked away by the door at which they had entered the room, and the man from Memphis showed a disposition to follow them.

"Remain here, Mr. Creswell," said Mallory. "I have a word to say to you. You need not

fear that you will be harmed, though you have tried to play such a dirty game. I happened to be occupying the room adjoining yours, and overheard something of the talk between you and this brave lad. I don't know what it all means; but I heard your name spoken, and heard a young lady mentioned. That was enough to tell me that you had some scoundrelly scheme on foot, and the mean trick which you tried to play on this boy proves that I guessed right."

"I believe that I am only doing my duty," said Creswell, "in looking after my niece, and trying to keep her out of the clutches of such an adventurer as you are."

"Adventurer in your teeth!" replied Mallory. "I have heard enough of you since I left Memphis, Alfred Creswell, to understand that you have no right to call any man an adventurer. If you try to carry out any more schemes against the peace and happiness of your niece, or to prevent her from exercising her free will, I give you fair warning that you will find me in your path. This is all, sir. Come into my room, my young friend, and let me speak to you."

The man from Memphis made no reply, and Featherweight and Herman followed Mallory into his room, where he closed the door that he had broken.

"Now, my young friend," he said, speaking in low tones, to prevent Mr. Creswell from hearing what was said, "I will be greatly obliged to you if you will tell me what led to this attack upon you."

"Not now," replied Fred. "Time is too short, and there is somethin' else to be done. It was about Miss Sophie Creswell, and she is here. That is all I can tell you just now. Have you got any baggage?"

"Only a valise."

"Pack it, right away, and come with me. Be quick," continued the lad, as Mallory hesitated. "You hain't got a minute's time to lose. That old seed in there is desp'rate, and Miss Creswell must be got away from here in short order, or he will play a snap game on us."

In a few minutes Frank Mallory had packed his valise, had paid his bill, and was accompanying Fred Light and his companion through the darkness that obscured the levee.

"Where are you taking me too?" he asked.

"To Miss Creswell's," was Fred's brief reply, and it was so satisfactory to Mallory, that he quickened his steps, and asked no more questions.

As they passed Gilligan's saloon, Herman stopped, saying that he would join them shortly, and they walked down to the Western World without him.

On the flatboat Featherweight called for Sophie Creswell, who was sitting up in her little room, awaiting his return.

"I was afraid that my uncle might have done you some harm," she said.

"Not a bit of it," replied Fred. "He had me in a tight place, but somebody you know of pulled me out, and here's that somebody."

Frank Mallory stepped forward, and the meeting between those two proved to Featherweight that they could not be separated, except by force.

Then Herman Schweitopfel entered, bringing a short and heavy rifle, evidently of German manufacture.

"What is that, and where did you get it?" asked Fred.

"Dot vos a yager," replied Herman, viewing the weapon with pride. "I got him to-day often a Deitchman who wanted to go by Vishconsin, oond vas so dead broke like nefer vas. I paid him fifteen dollar for dot yager, oond it vas vort fifty. I was a Freischutz by Yarmany, oond mebbe I finds me some use mit dot yager."

Sophie Creswell was telling her story to Mallory, when Featherweight interrupted her, to inform them that there was no time to lose, as she ought to make her escape before her uncle could interfere to prevent her.

"Where am I to go?" she asked.

"That's for you and Mr. Mallory to settle," said Fred. "Missouri is the place that I would strike for, to begin with. Can you row a boat, Mr. Mallory?"

That gentleman replied that he could pull a pretty good oar.

"You can take the skiff that belongs to this floatboat, then, and row Miss Creswell over to Missouri, if you think that is the best plan, and my friend and I will follow in my skiff, and go with you until we see that you are safe."

Frank Mallory assented to this proposition, as presenting the best plan of action for the present, and Sophie Creswell retired to make a few preparations for the journey. Featherweight requested Herman to go and launch his skiff and bring it down to the flatboat, and Herman, taking his rifle in his hand, cheerfully complied with this request.

He had been gone not more than ten minutes when George Collis, who had followed him out to take a look at the night, came hobbling back into the store-boat as fast as his shaky legs could carry him.

"By the eternal hurricanes!" he exclaimed, "they are comin'! A crowd of 'em! Blister my back, if they ain't too many for us!"

Featherweight thrust his head out of the door and saw the dark forms of at least half a dozen men who were running down the levee to the flatboat, and he hastily stepped back.

"Don't try to fight 'em," said the old man. "They're too many for ye. Git into the other room, and be quick about it, and I'll turn the fizziculator loose on 'em. That'll fetch 'em. Yes, that'll fetch 'em."

There was a strange light in the old man's eyes that meant victory, telling Mallory and Fred that he knew what he was about. In a moment they had passed into the inner room, and George Collie, following them in, had fastened the door behind them.

He then hastily uncovered something that looked like a copper boiler, and thrust a nozzle through a small hole in the partition.

Hardly had he done this when the trampling of feet was heard outside, and the men who had been seen running down the levee came pouring into the store-room. Oaths and shouts followed, among which Featherweight easily distinguished the hoarse voice of the rough who was known as Kaintuck;

"They've run in thar, boys. Bu'st the door in!"

George Collis quickly turned a screw and a hissing noise was heard.

CHAPTER VI.

A NAVAL ENGAGEMENT.

"THE fizziculator is turned loose!" exclaimed the old man, waving his hands wildly above his head. "The fizziculator is turned loose! That'll fetch 'em, by the etarnal hurricanes!"

It did "fetch 'em," to judge by the oaths and cries of disgust that were heard in the store-room, accompanied by coughing and such noises as precede a violent attack of seasickness. Then there was a stumbling stampede and all was silent in the outer room.

Those in the inner room were not long left to wonder at what had caused the stampede; for there came through the partition, tight as it was, such an overpowering and disgusting odor as compelled them to hold their noses.

"Open the back door, Miss Sophie," said the old man, as he turned the screw of his "fizziculator." Then he began to work the crank of a machine on the other side of the boat turning a fan wheel that sent a stream of fresh air into the store-room.

Then the heavy voice of Herman Schweitopfel was heard at the forward part of the flatboat, in tones of the most intense disgust:

"Mein Gott in himmel! Vot a schtink!"

"Come down to this end, Herr an!" shouted Featherweight, who had got his head out of what George Collis styled the back door, and the German entered his skiff and dropped down to where his friend was located.

Fred Light and Mallory looked out at the shore, and saw dimly through the darkness that obscured the levee, several men scattered about in various attitudes, all vomiting as if there was nothing else on earth left for them to do.

"The fizziculator is a success," remarked Mallory. "How easy it would be, just now, to give those rascals a sound thrashing!"

"Easy enough," replied Fred; "but we've got other fish to fry. Just now is the time to get Miss Creswell out of the way."

This was the thing to do, no doubt, and the young lady was ready. She bid an affectionate farewell to poor old George Collis, who was so exultant over the success of his "fizziculator" that he could hardly realize that she was going, and entered a skiff with Frank Mallory.

Featherweight and his partner got in the other skiff, and Herman wished to row; but Fred insisted upon taking the oars, claiming that he knew the direction and the currents better than his companion. So Herman took his seat in the stern, and amused himself with fondling his rifle.

The night was quite dark, as there was no moon, and the sky was obscured by clouds, but the water was quiet and smooth, and the two skiffs moved leisurely down the Ohio fearing no pursuit, as it was supposed that Alfred Creswell and his gang had been too badly demoralized by the "fizziculator" to try to follow them.

Frank Mallory, who proved himself a fair oarsman, took the directions of the party, and

Featherweight kept his skiff by the side of Mallory's, or occasionally dropped a little to the rear.

Just as they reached the swift current of the Mississippi they were surprised to hear the sound of oars behind them, and they stopped to listen. The rowing could then plainly be heard, and the rapid strokes of the oars suggested pursuit.

"Those chaps got over their sickness sooner than we allowed they would," remarked Featherweight. "They have picked up two boats and are comin' after us. One of 'em is a two-oared skiff, and the other carries four oars, and both are puttin' in their best licks."

"Pull away," said Mallory, "and we can beat them."

"So we can, but they might give us trouble when we get ashore. Pull away yourself, Mr. Mallory. I am goin' to loaf along and have some fun with those bullies. Where do you mean to land?"

"A little way down the river."

"Not as far as Madrid?"

"Oh, no. Just down in the bend a mile or so."

"All right. Go ahead, and never mind us. We will catch you when you land, if not before."

It was useless to argue the point with the lad, and Mallory's skiff shot away into the darkness, while the other followed it more slowly. Soon the sound of the approaching oars could be heard more plainly, and after a while the outline of one of the pursuing boats could be dimly seen.

"Just as I thought," said Fred. "The skiff's ahead. That suits me to a dot."

Herman Schweitopfel, who was growing uneasy, asked his young friend what he intended to do, and Featherweight explained his purpose in a few words.

"Lively is the word," he said, "and be sure that you don't tumble overboard."

"Dot vas alles recht," responded Herman, with a chuckle.

The pursuing skiff came nearer, and it could be seen that it contained three men, one rowing, one at the bow, and one at the stern. The man at the stern was no other than Kaintuck, to judge by the hoarse tones and the savage oaths with which he urged his oarsmen to greater speed.

Suddenly Featherweight stopping rowing, and his skiff seemed to float at the mercy of the current.

"Vot der teifel!" exclaimed Herman. "Vy don't you row?"

"I have lost one of my oars," replied the lad, loud enough to be heard in the other boat.

The oar was, indeed, unshipped, but was trailing in the water at the side of the skiff, held with a firm grasp by Herman.

"Now we've got 'em!" shouted Kaintuck. "It's that cussed young skunk and the Dutchman. Pull like bloody blue blazes, you son of a butcher, and run 'em down!"

But Featherweight was able with his one oar to prevent such a disaster as that, and the next moment the pursuing skiff shot alongside of his boat.

As it did so, Herman sprung to his feet, grasping the missing oar with both hands.

With all his force he drove the handle down through the bottom of the opposing skiff, and quickly withdrew it, making a hole through which the water rushed in a torrent. He sat down as suddenly as he had risen, handing the oar to Featherweight, who shipped it instantly, and pulled so vigorously that a few swift strokes took him out of sight and hearing of his pursuers.

"You vos mix too moosh vasser mit your whisky dot time, you big loafer!" Herman shouted, as they shot away.

"The other boat will have to stop and help 'em, anyhow," remarked Fred, "and I reckon we will be well out of the way afore they get settled down to work."

There could be no doubt of this, to judge by the rapidity with which the lad pulled his light skiff across the river, not heading against the current, but allowing it to help him as he pointed it in the direction indicated by Frank Mallory.

As he neared the Missouri shore, striking the lighter current that was caused by the sweep of the swift river toward the southwest, he stopped a moment to listen. He heard nothing of the pursuing boats, but he did hear the quick strokes of Frank Mallory's oars in the distance, and he pulled for the sound.

He made such quick time that he caught up with Mallory just as that gentleman had landed his boat and was assisting Miss Creswell to the shore.

"Who's there?" sharply demanded Frank, who could not be sure in the darkness that he had not been overtaken by one of the boats of his pursuers.

"All right, Mr. Mallory!" replied Featherweight, as he drove his skiff up on the mud.

"I was afraid that you had got into trouble," said Mallory. "What have you done?"

Fred briefly related the collision on the water while Herman's burly form shook with laughter.

"But there is still no time to lose," said Mallory. "They will repair damages and follow us, or Alfred Creswell is not the man I take him to be. We must make our boats safe and push on."

By the united efforts of the three men—counting Featherweight as a man—the skiffs were hauled well up from the water and made fast. Then they climbed to the top of the bank and stopped a moment to consider their course.

"What are you going to do now, Mr. Mallory?" asked Featherweight.

"I want to reach the cabin which I have occupied while I have been surveying swamps about here, and I tried to land at the point nearest to it. The cabin is not far from here, but the night is very dark and—"

He stopped suddenly, as his ears, as well as those of Featherweight, had caught the sound of oars on the water.

"That uncle of yours is just crazy to get hold of you, Miss Creswell," remarked Fred, and he and Mallory stared blankly at each other.

"We will have to go through the swamp," said the latter, as he drew a long breath.

"Through the swamp," exclaimed Sophie Creswell, thoroughly frightened by the prospect of such an attempt.

"Through the swamp," repeated Mallory. "It is a big swamp and a bad one; but you could not move fast enough to escape those wretches if we should try to go around, and there is no other course left to us. But there is no real danger, I believe, as I know every inch of ground in this region. There is but one path across the swamp, and I'm sure that those fellows cannot find it. Are you willing to make the trip, Sophie?"

"I will go anywhere with you, to escape from my uncle," she replied.

"Come on, then, my good friends, if you are willing to go with us. I will lead the way, and you need only to follow me closely."

"We mean to see you safe out of this scrape, if it takes a month of Sundays," said Featherweight, and they struck out into the gloom of the forest, Frank Mallory leading the way with Miss Creswell, Herman following with his beloved yager, and Fred Light bringing up the rear.

They had gone but a little distance when they heard the hoarse voice and oaths of Kaintuck at the water's edge.

"Here's thar boats, boys! Lively up the bank, now! We'll run 'em into a hole yet!"

Before the fugitives stretched the swamp, a broad sheet of stagnant water, interspersed with hummocks and clumps of cypress knots, and overshadowed by immense trees that would have shut out the sun if it had been daylight. Snakes of brilliant colors were wont to glide over the surface of that dark water, and the deadly moccasin might lie lazily on any root or hummock that lifted itself above the slimy ooze. From the interior of the swamp came strange and weird noises, of which the only familiar one was the croak of the bull-frog.

If the little party could have seen what was before them, they might well have shrunk from the task which they were about to undertake in thick darkness.

But Frank Mallory had made no empty boast when he said that he knew every inch of that region, and he was confident of his ability to pilot his friends safely through the morass.

"Follow me closely," he said, as he plunged into the recesses of the swamp, carefully guiding and holding Sophie Creswell, and planting his own feet firmly as he stepped from hummock to hummock. At last he stepped on a narrow ridge that crossed a sheet of water, with Herman and Featherweight close at his heels.

"We are all right now," he said, "and those rascals will hardly try to pursue us into the swamp."

Hardly had he spoken when the rough voice of Kaintuck was heard howling in the rear:

"Come on, boys, and don't be afraid! I know the trail, and we'll hive the cussed hounds, now!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mallory. "That man knows the trail! Come on, my friends, and may God help us!"

He pressed forward over the ridge; but Sophie Creswell was only a woman, and her nerves failed her, and he could make but slow progress

compared with that of the relentless pursuers who so eagerly followed his trail.

He reached a log that formed a bridge where a strip of water parted the ridge, and Sophie shuddered and shrunk back. Without a word, Mallory lifted her in his arms, and almost ran across the log.

As Herman and Featherweight mounted the log, they again heard the yell of Kaintuck, fearfully near them. The German muttered something that might have been a curse in his native tongue, and fingered the lock of his rifle.

"Don't do that," said Featherweight. "We mustn't have any killin' if we can help it. Go on across, Herman, and keep Mr. Mallory in sight if you can, but don't go far away. I'm goin' to try to put a stop to this sort of thing."

Herman crossed to the ridge at the other end of the log, where he stopped, faced about, and cocked his rifle.

About midway of the log it partly rested on a hummock. There Featherweight stopped, slipped down upon the hummock, and concealed himself by the side of the log.

There might have been a moccasin snake lying on the hummock, waiting to strike its deadly fangs into the brave boy, but he thought of the task that he had set himself to do, and closed his teeth firmly as he sunk down in the darkness.

CHAPTER VII. THE SWAMP TRAIL.

As Featherweight crouched at the side of the log in the midst of the swamp, he listened to the footfalls of the pursuing party as they crossed the narrow ridge which had just been traversed by the fugitives.

In a few minutes they had mounted the log, and their leader uttered a cry of triumph as he caught sight of the dark form of Herman Schweitopfel at the end of the slippery bridge.

Featherweight raised his head and watched his chance.

Just as Kaintuck reached the spot where the log rested on the hummock, the lad partly rose, seized him by the ankle, and upset him into the swamp.

The next comer, who was close upon Kaintuck's heels, met the same fate. As he fell he caught at the man immediately behind him, and both dropped into the water with a cry and a splash. The others, astonished and frightened by the mysterious mishaps of their comrades, retreated from the log, and sought the surer footing of the ridge.

Featherweight instantly climbed up on the log, and silently ran to the end where Herman was yet standing, ready to use his rifle with effect if harm should come to his young friend.

Frank Mallory, perceiving that his companions were no longer following him, had halted at a little distance from the log, wondering what detained them. Shortly they came running to him, and Featherweight briefly explained the cause of the delay.

"I upset three of those fellers into the swamp, Mr. Mallory, and the others will have fun fishing them out."

"You are a trump, my lad, and no mistake," said Mallory. "That will give us time to reach

my cabin, and I believe nothing else would have done it. Come on!"

Brisk walking soon brought them out of the swamp and into the forest, where they were sure of a firm footing and an easy course.

They had crossed the swamp at the time of night which is known as "the darkest hour, just before day," and the faint gray light that precedes the dawn was beginning to be visible in the sky when they reached a clearing, in the center of which was a small log cabin.

"There is my shanty," said Mallory. "We will at least be better off there than we have been at any time during the night."

They crossed the clearing and stopped at the door of the cabin, upon which Mallory pounded vigorously.

"Jim Biggs!" he shouted. "Jim Biggs! rouse up and open the door!"

"Who is there?" came from within.

"Frank Mallory! Open the door, and be quick about it!"

A bolt was drawn, the door was opened by a young man in his shirt sleeves, and the party passed in.

"Strike a light, Jim," said Mallory, and he made the door fast while the young man lighted an oil lamp.

By the light it could be seen that the cabin was a rude one, built of unhewn logs, with a floor of rough boards, and a small loft that was reached by a ladder. At one end was a clay fireplace with a wooden chimney; at the other end was the door, and in one side had been cut a small window, which was closed by a wooden shutter. As Frank Mallory explained, it was a rude tenement that had been thrown up to afford a shelter for himself and his instruments while he was engaged in surveying operations in that section. He had finished his work, and had left the cabin in charge of his assistant, Jim Biggs, while he went to Cairo to attend to a little matter of business.

"It is not what you may call a fine house," he said, "nor is it a very comfortable one; but it is strong and fit to stand a siege. You may believe this when I tell you that Jim and I were shut up here nearly two days, miles from any house, by a pack of horse-thieves. I had given evidence against one of their number, and the others had sworn to get even with me. We kept them off, but we make no brags about that, as there were only four or five of them."

"How are you off for grub?" asked Featherweight.

"Plenty of bacon and corn-meal, and a little flour, I believe. Oh, we can hold out, and for bringing us safely here we must thank you, my young friend."

"I am sure that I thank you with all my heart," said Sophie, as she gave Featherweight both her hands. "If it had not been for your help, I might now be in the power of my uncle and those Russians."

"Speakin' of those chaps," remarked the lad, "maybe they might be gettin' around here about this time."

"That's a fact," said Mallory, "and we must keep a lookout for them. Start a fire, Jim, so that we can get some breakfast, and I will take a glance at the outside."

He opened the shutter of the window that faced the direction from which they had come, and looked out. There was light enough to enable him to see several dark forms skulking in the edge of the timber.

"There they are!" he exclaimed. "They seem to be waiting in the woods, looking for a chance to get at us."

"You may bet your sweet life that they mean to do it, or bu'st a trace," said Featherweight. "I tell you, Mr. Mallory, those fellers ain't a bit fond of us, 'cause we have used 'em tol'ably rough. Let me see," he continued, counting off on his fingers; "they got a lickin' at Gilligan's saloon; then they got a settin' down at the hotel; then the old man's fizziculator, as he called it, made 'em as sick as dogs; then Herman stove in a boat, and gave some of 'em a duckin'; then I tumbled three of 'em into the swamp. Five hard knocks, and nary count against us. I reckon their hearts are nigh broke with wantin' to get even with us. And that ain't all, by a long shot. I say, Miss Creswell, that uncle of yours is powerful keen to get hold of you, and I guess it ain't because he is so very fond of you, either."

"Indeed it is not," replied Sophie. "Sometimes I have believed that he really hates me, and would be glad if I were dead."

"Just so. Do you happen to own any property, or is there any comin' to you?"

"None that I know of. I have understood that my father was a rich man at one time, or at least very well off; but uncle Alfred told me that he became a worthless drunkard, and died in poverty."

"I would just be willin'," remarked Featherweight, "to bet my head against a green persimmon that he lied like sixty when he said that. As he ain't fond of you, and is so keen to get hold of you, it must be because there is somethin' to be made by you, and I lose my guess if property ain't mixed up in the business some way. Anyhow, he has put those chaps on your trail, and he is with them, no doubt, and he is keepin' them up to their work, and it is costin' him a heap more than that fifty dollars he offered me, and there's no tellin' how much it will cost him before he is through with the job. They will be mighty apt to give us all the salt and vinegar they've got in the shop. I say, Mr. Mallory, how are you off for weapons?"

"For what?"

"Shootin'-irons and such."

"I have a good rifle, and Jim Biggs has another, and each of us has a pistol. Your friend Herman has a German rifle."

"Dot vas a goot gun, too," remarked Herman.

"And I've a got a good revolver," said Fred. "Well, we can make it hot for them, if they drive us to it. What do they seem to be doin' now?"

Frank Mallory reported that they had passed around the edge of the timber toward the side of the house in which the door was located, and that it was time to prepare to meet an attack if they intended one.

The rough logs of which the cabin was built had never been "chinked and daubed," and there were, consequently, some pretty large

cracks here and there in the walls, through which the movements of those outside could easily be observed. As Fred Light put it, the party within were like the "mouse in a hollow log," which could see everything without being seen. Frank Mallory and Herman set at work, with an ax and an auger, to enlarge some of those cracks, so as to use them as loopholes, if firing should be necessary. Jim Biggs, in the mean time, occupied himself with tranquilly making coffee, frying bacon, and baking corn-dodgers.

It was soon evident that the besiegers had determined to approach the cabin from a direction that would avoid the window. They had picked up a light log, and were bringing it across the clearing, with the intention of bursting in the door.

"Come here with your rifle, Jim," said Mallory. "We may have some warm work with those fellows."

"Confound it!" replied Jim Biggs. "Do you suppose I am going to let this bacon burn and these corn-cakes spoil?"

Featherweight took the rifle, and went to the door.

"I do hope there is not going to be any fighting, Frank," said Sophie Creswell.

"I hope so, too; but we must be ready for the worst. Don't fire a shot, my friends, unless it is absolutely necessary. I will give them a little warning with my pistol, and that may save powder and lead."

The log approached the cabin, and those within could see that the attacking party was composed of six men, with Kaintuck at the head, while Alfred Creswell followed at a little distance in the rear, watching the movements of his allies.

"Keep away from here, or you will get hurt!" shouted Frank Mallory, when they were within a few rods of the cabin.

No attention was paid to this warning, and Mallory thrust the barrel of his pistol through one of the cracks, and took a careful aim.

The sharp report of the pistol gave Sophie Creswell a start, and brought from Kaintuck a howl, as he loosed his hold upon the log, and limped away with a small hole in the calf of his leg. His comrades no longer seemed to take a lively interest in door-breaking, as they dropped the log and retreated.

It was soon agreed by the besieged that they were to be left unmolested for a while, and they proceeded to pay attention to the breakfast that had been prepared for them by Jim Biggs. Although by no means dainty, it was acceptable to hungry people, and they did it ample justice.

Thus the morning passed in conversation and waiting and watching, and it seemed that Alfred Creswell and his party had regularly laid siege to the cabin, as they had posted a sentinel on each side of that fortress, while the others kept in the edge of the timber.

"I wonder what they do for something to eat," said Jim Biggs, as he was preparing for those in the cabin a dinner that was a repetition of their breakfast.

"I reckon they can go awhile without eatin', as long as they have plenty of whisky," replied

Featherweight, who had been keenly watching the movements of the men outside. "It seems to me that two of 'em have quit the camp lately, and one of those, as near as I can make out, is the man who offered me that fifty-dollar job. I've a notion that they have sent him off to hunt some whisky, and have sent a man with him to fetch the liquor."

It was late in the afternoon when Featherweight's guess was verified. Then Alfred Creswell was again visible among the men at the edge of the timber, who were seen passing around a pretty big jug and sampling its contents.

The jug was such a strong attraction, that by dark all the sentinels had been withdrawn to the main body, with the exception of one, who was stationed at a bridle-path that led into the wood.

"Something is going to be done now," said Frank Mallory, as the shadows of night settled down upon the clearing. "Nothing would suit me better than to meet those rascals and fight them in a fair field, with no favor; but, for Miss Creswell's sake, we must not attempt anything of the kind if we can possibly avoid it. But something must be done, and I propose that we leave this place to-night before midnight."

CHAPTER VIII.

FEATHERWEIGHT'S LITTLE TRICK.

ALL looked at Mallory, as if they were well pleased with his proposal, but wondered how he meant to carry it into execution. He explained his purpose speedily enough.

"There is a job on hand for you, Jim," he said to his assistant. "You can steal away from here, I suppose, without being interfered with by that scalawag who is trying to block up our bridle-path."

"Of course one man can leak out easy enough," replied Biggs, "and that chap wouldn't be a straw in his way."

"Very well. When it gets a little darker, suppose you slip out and go to the old clearing where our horses are pastured. Take the bridles and bring both of the horses as near to the cabin as you consider safe, and then give me the signal."

Jim Biggs readily undertook this expedition and left the cabin as soon as it was fairly dark, stealing out through the partly-opened door. He was scarcely visible a moment after he left the cabin, having sunk to the ground and pursued his way, snake-like, toward the timber. As no alarm came from the sentinel who was stationed on that side, his friends were safe in concluding that he had reached the woods without being discovered.

He had not been long away, when Featherweight, who had run the matter over in his mind, suggested to Frank Mallory that something more might be done, in his opinion, to aid the escape of the party from the cabin.

"What do you propose?" asked Mallory.

"Well, sir, it would depend on whether you happen to have any sort of sleepy stuff about the shebang."

"Sleepy stuff? What do you mean?"

"Laudanum, or someth'n' in that line."

"I do happen to have quite a stock of laudanum, which I got for a neighbor of mine at home, but have not yet had a chance to take it to him. What do you want to do with it?"

"The fact is, Mr. Mallory, that in the flat-boatin' business I have had consid'able to do with lousy folks, and have noticed two things about 'em. In the first place, a man who is drinkin' tol'able heavy, and has a bottle or a jug, gen'ally keeps it in one place, because he has sense enough to know that he might get mixed up if he should change his spots. In the second place, whisky keeps callin' for more whisky. When the fire dies out it has to be attended to, or there's trouble. I watched those skunks when they were drinkin', and saw where they put the jug. I am sure that it is there yet, alongside of a big sycamore and they are nearly all asleep, or soon will be. I want you to give me enough of that laudanum to make a big dose for them all around; and I will sneak over there and pour it into the jug, and that'll fix 'em for a while, I reckon, or a few of 'em."

"You are a trump, Featherweight," said Mallory, who had been quick to learn the nickname that seemed to fit the lively lad so well. "But I don't want you to run any such risk. We can't afford to lose you."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid for me. I can go to that sycamore as straight as a bee, and I ain't goin' to run over anybody, nor will I let anybody run over me; and what's more, I just feel it in my boots that I've got to salt those suckers down for the night."

"Perhaps," suggested Mallory, "one of them might get a bigger dose than he ought to have, and sleep forever."

"That is their lookout. I can't see that we have anything to risk. But I don't believe there is much chance for anythin' of that sort. Those cusses will watch each other, Mr. Mallory, and none of 'em is likely to get much more'n his share of what they all want. Just let me sneak over there and try the trick. If I don't see my way clear to do it safe, I will back out."

Sophie Creswell was of the opinion, and the others agreed with her, that Featherweight was not a person who would be likely to back out of anything. However, as Herman Schweitpfel seemed to have no fear for his young friend, it was settled that he should make the attempt.

He had noticed the maneuvers of Jim Biggs when he left the cabin, and copied them closely, sinking to the ground as soon as he was outside of the door, and availing himself of the numerous stumps that were scattered over the clearing. As the night was quite dark, he had no difficulty in making his way without being observed, until he came quite close to what may be called the camp of the besiegers.

They had no fire, and had not built a fire since they came on the ground. All were asleep, or in an attitude of sleep, except one man, who was standing with his back against a tree and his face to the cabin. But he was not a bit wakeful, to judge by the frequency with which his head dropped upon his breast. Some of the others were restless, groaning and tossing in their sleep.

"It won't be long afore they will want some whisky," muttered Featherweight, "and they are bound to get it when they want it."

He then began to circle around the camp, keeping his eyes on the big sycamore, whose form in the daylight and whose appearance at night he had carefully noted.

He had nearly reached it when a dry stick broke under his weight. The noise was a slight one, but it seemed to him at the moment as loud as the report of a pistol.

The sentinel started, stepped forward, and looked around, while Featherweight sunk upon the ground, and remained motionless behind the sycamore until the man had resumed his position and his half-awake attitude.

Then the lad crept closer to the trunk of the tree, reached around for the jug, removed the cork, poured in the contents of the bottle of laudanum, which Mallory had given him, replaced the jug where he had found it, and quietly circled around the camp on his return to the cabin.

He had got but a little way from the scene of his exploit, when he heard a slight commotion in the camp, which caused him to hide behind a stump and look back.

The half-awake sentinel, having had the jug in his mind for some time, had concluded that a portion of its contents would adorn the interior of his person. So he stepped quietly to the sycamore, raised the jug, and prepared to absorb the fluid mixture.

But his movements had not been stealthy enough to escape the attention of one of his comrades, who awoke at that moment, and sounded the alarm.

"Hold on there, Jake!" he exclaimed. "Don't be playin' gum games on us. Give us all a chance."

"Come up and take it, then," gruffly replied the other. "It is dry work keepin' watch fur you loafers, and I mean to wet it."

The others awoke, and pressed forward for their share of the liquid that supplied for them the place of solid nourishment.

"Pears to me thar's a mighty bitter taste to that whisky," muttered the man who got the first taste of the contents of the jug.

"Reckon the taste is in that rotten gullet of yours," said a comrade, and the jug was passed around, each taking a hearty swig.

Satisfied that the drugged liquor had been and would be fairly divided, Featherweight crawled back to the cabin, but was obliged to wriggle very slowly and carefully across the clearing, as he could more easily be seen in returning than in going. He was joyfully received at the cabin.

"You were so long away," said Mallory, "that we began to be afraid that you had got into trouble."

"If I had, you would have known it," replied the lad. "You may bet your sweet life that there would have been some sort of a row afore they gobbled me."

"Did you do the trick?"

"Of course I did, and I reckon that some of those chaps will be pretty well salivated by mornin'. They had a good snifter all around afore I lost sight of them."

At this moment the hooting of an owl was plainly heard by those in the cabin.

"That is Jim Biggs's signal," said Mallory, and he partly opened the door and answered it with a similar hoot.

"What is the next move?" asked Featherweight.

"The next move," replied Mallory, "is to get away from here as soon as we can."

"But there is one of those chaps who is likely to be wide awake."

"Yes; the man who is posted at the bridle-path yonder. He must be attended to, and I will undertake to settle his case."

Sophie entreated that Frank would not expose himself to danger.

"I see no danger," replied the young surveyor. "He is only one man, and I am sure that I can easily surprise him and get the better of him. Now, Featherweight, when you hear a hoot from me, such as you heard a few minutes ago, you must take these two saddles, and one of you must take Jim Biggs's rifle, and guide Miss Creswell across the clearing to the bridle-path, where you will find me."

Mallory concealed in a hole under the floor a few instruments and articles of clothing which he did not wish to lose, took his rifle, and left the cabin, striking across the clearing considerably to the right of the bridle-path, so that he might come upon the sentry unawares.

Those who were left in the cabin waited anxiously for Frank Mallory's hoot, and in the interval filled their pockets and a small bag with provisions that had been prepared during the day for the purpose of travel.

Still they waited anxiously, but heard nothing of the hoot that would be so welcome.

"He has been discovered," said Sophie, "and they will capture him."

"You needn't be afraid for him," remarked Featherweight. "He ain't the sort that is apt to get picked up."

Just then the report of a rifle broke the stillness of the night.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Sophie. "He has been shot!"

Featherweight and Herman picked up the two saddles and the two rifles, and flung open the cabin door. Requesting Sophie to carry the bag, and to follow them as rapidly as she could, they sped across the clearing, in the direction from which the report had come.

They had gone but a little distance when they heard Mallory's signal.

"Just as I thought," remarked Featherweight, as he slackened his speed. "Instead of getting shot, he has shot somebody."

CHAPTER IX.

ALFRED CRESWELL'S ALLIES.

ALFRED CRESWELL was a man of great energy, and fertile in resources. When he had determined, for reasons that were satisfactory to himself, to regain possession of his niece, it was not in his nature to allow himself to be driven from his purpose by any ordinary obstacles. He also wished, it may be supposed, to gratify his grudge against Fred Light, whose re-

fusal to enter his service cost him so much trouble.

By his liberal supplies of money and liquor, and his liberal promises of more money and liquor, he had started and kept up the pursuit of Sophie and her friends, in spite of the hard knocks his gang had received from the fugitives.

As he had not entered George Collis's store-boat with the others, he had experienced none of the ill effects that were produced by the old man's "fizziculator." Seeing the departure of the two skiffs from the store-boats, he at once hastened to secure two boats for pursuit and two additional men to row. Into these boats he bundled Kaintuck and those of his gang who were able to go, with their weapons and a supply of liquor, and gave chase to the fugitives.

The blow that had stove in the bottom of Kaintuck's boat had caused delay, but not enough to induce Alfred Creswell to abandon the pursuit. A coat was stuffed into the hole, the boat was bailed out, and they pressed forward, coming in sight of the Missouri shore just in time to discover the whereabouts of the fugitives.

When Frank Mallory struck into the swamp, Alfred Creswell had good reason to congratulate himself on having chosen Kaintuck as the leader of his party. That useful ally had hunted over the region which they were about to enter, and claimed to be, as he doubtless was, acquainted with every inch of it. He was also an expert woodsman, and professed to be able to follow any trail that he might be set upon.

So the man from Memphis hurried his party forward, sure of overtaking his rebellious niece, and of settling accounts with her faithful friends.

Featherweight's audacious ambush, by which three of the pursuers had been dumped into the swamp, was an entirely unexpected stroke of ill-fortune, and it dampened the spirits of the party, as well as the bodies of some of them. The three were fished out, dripping with water and slime, and their clothes were wrung out, and they were liberally drenched with whisky to ward off the ill effects of their ducking; but the progress of the party was delayed by this calamity more than by either of the previous blows that had been struck at them.

When they reached the clearing, the fugitives were safely ensconced in Frank Mallory's log cabin. Kaintuck was sure that they were there, as he knew the place, and had been sure, since Mallory entered the swamp, that he would take refuge in his cabin. Soon they saw smoke rising from the stick chimney, and the question of occupancy was settled.

This was quite satisfactory to Alfred Creswell. Having holed his foxes, it seemed to him that their capture was only a question of time. Kaintuck assured him that the cabin was at a considerable distance from any settlement or dwelling, so that it was not likely that his operations would be interfered with. If he could not starve the besieged party into a surrender, he had no doubt that he would be able to find other means of getting hold of them. Therefore, the failure of the attempt upon the door, though it proved that Sophie's friends were ready and willing to fight fire with fire, had no

disheartening effect upon him. It was only necessary, as he considered, to watch the cabin and guard against the escape of those who were shut up in it.

But no commander can carry on a campaign without securing the regular rations of his troops, and Alfred Creswell found it a pretty serious matter to act as commissary for his little army. He soon felt the need of food; but that lack did not seem to trouble the others. They could shoot something, they said, if they should get hungry; but whisky they absolutely must have, or they would be obliged to leave him in the lurch.

Kaintuck knew a house, some miles away, at which both whisky and provisions could be procured, and he proposed to accompany Mr. Creswell in a search for those necessities. So the man from Memphis was obliged to take a long and tedious tramp, which did not tend to better his humor, or to lessen his vindictiveness toward those in the log cabin.

When night came he was thoroughly tired and in need of sleep. So, after cautioning Kaintuck and his comrades to keep a close watch on the log cabin, and to use the contents of the jug with discretion, he lay down on the ground, cursing the hard fate that condemned him to such discomforts.

At about the middle of the night he was awakened by a rifle-shot. At first he thought it was a dream, but reflection convinced him that he had really heard it. It seemed strange that the shot had not awokened any of the others, who were sleeping as peacefully as if they had no consciences to trouble them; but he soon perceived that even the man who had been left to guard the camp had fallen asleep at his post.

Surely there was something wrong in this, and Alfred Creswell at once laid the blame on the jug of whisky, supposing that his allies had stupefied themselves by drinking too deeply.

He endeavored to awaken them, and succeeded in partially arousing Kaintuck, who had the hardest head in the gang; but even he was so stupid that it was some time before he could be got to understand what had happened.

"A shot fired?" he asked. "Are you sure of that, boss? P'haps it was Jim Quigly, over on t'other side of the cabin. And that cussed Jake Losey has gone to sleep on watch! Here are the otaer fellows, too, sleepin' like logs, and my head is so heavy that I can scarcely lift it. What in thunder is the matter with us all, anyhow?"

"I suppose you have been emptying that jug of whisky into yourselves," angrily replied Mr. Creswell.

"It can't be that, boss. We hain't had but one horn around since we laid down here, and that wouldn't begin to make us so boozy as all this comes to. Say, fellers, rouse up! What's got into you, anyhow?"

While Kaintuck was endeavoring to awaken his stupefied companions, the trampling of horses was heard approaching them and the horsemen suddenly stopped.

"Hold on, Jack!" said a deep voice. "We have run across some sort of a camp."

"Durn my skin if I don't know that voice!" exclaimed Kaintuck, rubbing his bushy head. "Is that you, Doc? Is that you, Doc Terry?"

"All right, Jack," said the deep voice. "Come on!" and the two horsemen rode up and alighted. The man who was hailed as Doc Terry recognized Kaintuck at once, and wanted to know what he was doing there.

"The boss can put you up to the job," said Kaintuck. "My head is kinder muddled. These two men are all right, 'squire."

Alfred Creswell had easily perceived that the new-comers were of the same stripe as his allies, and had determined to enlist them in his service. He briefly told them why his party were there, the difficulties they had encountered, and the condition of affairs about the log cabin.

"If you want any more help," said Terry, "we are willing to join you, as we have an account to settle with that meddlesome surveyor. He swore one of our boys into jail not long ago, and since then we have had a scrimmage with him right here. We will help you to smoke him out, if you want us."

Alfred Creswell assured the two horsemen that they would be well paid for their services.

"That's the ticket!" exclaimed Kaintuck. "Now, Doc Terry, take a drink with us, you and your pard, to bind the bargain."

Terry lifted the jug to his mouth, but quickly set it down.

"This liquor of yours has a strange taste," he said. "I wonder what is the matter with it."

He tasted it again, and said that it was very bitter.

"That is just what Jake Losey was complainin' of," remarked Kaintuck.

"Where did you get it?" asked Terry.

"At Sam Buck's."

"He would not have dosed it, of course; but it has been drugged by somebody. This liquor has laudanum in it. I am a doctor, you know, or used to be, and am a judge of such matters. Did anybody notice the bitter taste when it was brought here?"

Kaintuck was sure that it had not been perceived until about the middle of the night, when they had a drink all around.

"It is lucky for you that you drank no more," said Terry. "There is laudanum enough in that jug to lay you all out. Somebody has drugged it during the night."

Kaintuck turned savagely upon Alfred Creswell.

"If you have been playin' this game on us, 'squire," he said, "off goes your head!"

"Haven't you sense enough to know that I am the last man in the world who would try such a trick?" replied the man from Memphis. "I am not here for the purpose of cutting my own throat or breaking up my own game."

"Of course he is not," said Doc Terry. "It seems to me that you must have kept a poor watch last night, and that one of the men you have shut up there was smart enough to slip out and do that job."

"It was that young scamp who is called Featherweight!" exclaimed Mr. Creswell. "I will bet my head that he dosed the jug."

"Who ever did it, none of you must drink any

more of that liquor, and I will pour it out to make sure."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Kaintuck. "Ain't thar any way, Doc, to git laudanum out o' whisky?"

"None that I know of," replied Terry. "Has anybody gone to see about the shot that was fired a while ago?"

Nobody had left the camp to see about anything. In fact, all but Mr. Creswell had been too drowsy to move.

"That must be looked into at once," urged Terry. "Perhaps the man you had over there has been killed, and your birds have got away. You would have heard something from him, if he was alive. Rouse these men, Kaintuck, and set them moving. You all need something to stir you up and keep you stirring. Jack and I will ride over and see what is the matter."

Kaintuck yelled at his men, and shook and kicked them, until he got them on their feet, and set them in motion to follow the horsemen.

On their way across the clearing they stopped at the log cabin.

The door was open, and the building was empty!

CHAPTER X.

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT.

THE sentinel who had been set to watch the bridle-path was not as drowsy as his comrades on the other side of the clearing, as he had not been dosed with the drugged whisky. In fact, he had not had a drink since dark, and perhaps it was his longing for a taste of the contents of the jug that kept him wakeful and watching for his relief, which had been promised at midnight.

But he was not wakeful enough to guard against the insidious approach of an enemy who had wriggled across the clearing, had crawled along the edge of the timber, and was silently approaching him from the rear.

The first intimation he had of danger was the crackling of a twig just behind him. He turned quickly, and was faced by a tall man, who held a cocked revolver leveled at his head.

"If you stir, or utter a word," said Frank Mallory, in a low but determined tone, "I will blow your brains out!"

The man stared blankly and in silence at his unexpected assailant.

"Throw down your gun!" ordered Mallory, and he dropped it as if it burned his hands. As it fell, the hammer struck upon the cap, and the charge was exploded, doing no injury with the exception of alarming those in the cabin and awaking Alfred Creswell.

"I don't mean to hurt you," said Mallory; "but I am going to tie you. Lie down on your face, and I warn you that you will get hurt if you try to resist me or give an alarm."

Under the persuasive influence of the six-shooter, the man promptly obeyed the orders of Mallory, who speedily tied his hands and feet, and then gave him a more comfortable position on his back.

Having finished his task, he gave the signal to his friends, who soon came running to him,

and Sophie was overjoyed at seeing that her lover was unharmed.

"So nobody was killed, after all," said Featherweight. "Well, I am glad of that. But you lad better gag this chap, Mr. Mallory, or he will be apt to set those hounds on our trail afore we can get fairly out o' reach."

As Herman Schweitopsel professed to be an adept in the art of gagging, he was given this duty, which he performed to his own satisfaction, if not that of his victim.

"Hark!" exclaimed Fred, and all listened, hearing indistinctly the sound of voices across the clearing.

"They have waked up," said Mallory. "Probably that rifle-shot has aroused them. We must hurry and get out of the way."

"They won't be apt to move about very lively for a while," said the lad, "after fillin' themselves up with that dosed whisky. As we are goin', I reckon I may as well take along this seller's rifle and fixin's, so's he won't be in danger of hurtin' himself or other folks."

Mallory gave a hoot, which was answered at no great distance by Jim Biggs. Then he took the bag from Sophie, gave her his hand, and struck off into the forest.

Another signal was sounded, to get the direction, and soon the party came to where Jim Biggs was standing with the horses, which were speedily saddled.

Then arose a question as to who should ride. Of course Sophie would ride Frank's horse, as the horn of his saddle would make it serve as a side-saddle, and Mallory was of the opinion that Herman should mount the other horse.

"I don't been no cavalry man," protested the German; but it was the verdict of the others that as they were the lightest and best walkers, besides being better able to run if a rapid movement should be necessary, Herman ought to ride, and must ride. Accordingly he was compelled to mount the horse, and was given the bag to carry.

Jim Biggs took the lead, and started up the bridle-path at a brisk pace, followed by Herman. Then came Sophie Creswell, with Frank Mallory trotting at her side, and Fred Light generally pretty close to the other side.

"What place are you aiming to strike at now?" asked Featherweight, when they had fairly got under way.

"I want to take Miss Creswell to my home—my mother's home, rather," replied Mallory. "It is forty miles or more from here, a good tramp, and through a pretty hard country; but I hope we will be able to find a place where we can rest in peace to-night. Indeed, I am sure we will, if the wretches we left behind us conclude to give us no more bother."

"And for our safety," said Sophie, "I will have no one to thank so much as our brave young friend, who gave me the first warning of danger, and who has ever since been so true and active and skillful."

"Much obliged, Miss Creswell," replied Fred; "but I'm afraid that you ain't safe yet, by a long shot. Most anybody but that uncle of yours would have quit the chase, after tumbling over all the blocks we have put in his way; but it is easy to see that he is just crazy to get

hold of you, and I miss my guess if he don't find some way of rousin' those fellers up and settin' them on our trail again."

"He means business, no doubt," said Mallory; "but he had better not carry it too far. We are all well armed now, and if it comes to the worst we can defend ourselves."

Sophie expressed the hope that it would not come to bloodshed.

"So do I," said Featherweight. "This is nothin' but fun to me, and you don't owe me any thanks, Miss Creswell, for takin' my own way of enjoyin' myself; but I ain't hot for killin' folks, any more'n I am for gettin' killed."

The night travel was uneventful and somewhat tedious. All of the party had got snatches of sleep during the day and were fairly fitted to endure the fatigues of the journey, but it was tiresome and all would have been glad to bring it to an end.

Morning found them moving leisurely along a forest road which seemed to have been seldom traveled. As yet they had passed no habitation; but at daybreak they came in sight of a log house at the edge of a small clearing, and Featherweight proposed that they should stop and try to get some breakfast, or at least a cup of coffee for Miss Creswell.

"It won't do," said Mallory. "That is where Jack Sessions lives, one of the gang of horse-thieves who shut Jim Biggs and me up in our cabin a while ago, and we would gain nothing by stopping there."

As the party passed the house the door was partly open and a head was thrust out. Then the head was drawn back and the door was closed.

"If our pursuers are still on our trail," said Mallory, "and if they ask for information about us at that house they will be sure to get it."

The route that was taken by the party led them past a few more houses; but Mallory still thought that it was not advisable to stop at any of them, as the inhabitants would be more likely to hinder than to help them.

As noon approached they found themselves in a wild and hilly region, and Mallory announced to his companions that they were about to cross the spur of a range of hills that separated them from what he considered a friendly country. Beyond that range he believed that they would be comparatively safe from pursuit or other molestation.

They were following a narrow road, not much better than a trail, that led up a steep hill, from the top of which quite an exterior view of the surrounding country could be had.

"I do hope that we may soon be safe," said Sophie Creswell, as they were mounting the slope. "It does not seem possible that we have been followed any further."

"At least, we have seen no sign of pursuit as yet," replied Mallory.

"There they come!" shouted Jim Biggs, who had reached the top of the hill.

The others pressed forward until they gained the same elevation, when they turned and looked back at the route over which they had passed.

On their track, at the distance of not more than half a mile, they saw several men hastening forward on foot, with two mounted men in advance, and there could be no doubt that they were Alfred Creswell's party.

Frank Mallory viewed the pursuers carefully through his field-glass.

"They are all there," he said, "and they have gained two recruits. One of those mounted men I recognize as Jack Sessions, one of the horse-thieves I spoke about, and the other probably belongs to the same gang."

"They must have laid in a fresh lot of whisky," remarked Featherweight.

"They have plenty of perseverance, too, I am sorry to say. That uncle of yours, Sophie, is the most determined man I ever met. As they say in this country, he is devil-bent on taking you back to Memphis."

"It is a shame," she said, "that such a persecution can be permitted in a civilized country."

"Vas dis vot you calls a shivilized gountry?" asked Herman. "It vants to be shivilized mit a club, by shiminy!"

"We have no time to waste in talking about it," rejoined Mallory. "It seems that this affair is not to be settled without a fight, and if we must fight the sooner the better."

"Not here," said Jim Biggs. "I know this country betler than you do, Mr. Mallory. A little way ahead is a place where we can fortify ourselves and beat them off."

The party followed the lead of Jim Biggs, and soon reached a point where the narrow trail led between a cliff on one side and a high hill on the other, forming a pass which could be easily defended. The highest portion of the pass was at its entrance, where the trail sloped to the front and the rear.

Here they halted, and Frank Mallory took the two horses and Sophie Creswell to the rear, while the others hastened to build a breastwork of fragments of rock.

"You must remain here, Sophie," said Frank, "where you will be out of the reach of bullets, if any should be flying about."

I will pray for you," she replied, as she took the position he assigned her, behind a point of rock.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FUGITIVES AT BAY.

FRANK MALLORY hastened back to his comrades when he had attended to the safety of Sophie Creswell and the horses, and found them already confronted by their enemies, who had quickly discovered the preparations that were being made for the defense of the pass, and had halted to consider the question of making an attack.

The young surveyor immediately added his efforts to those of the others, and in a short time they had thrown a breastwork across the trail. It was then sufficient for their protection if they should be cautious about exposing their persons, and every moment added to its bight and strength.

"Now let dose vishky bloats try to shtorm der works," said Herman, as he affectionately caressed his German rifle. "Dey vill yoost vish dey vas nefer begun dot, by shiminy!"

Herman's confidence was not without a fair foundation. He and his friends were considerably outnumbered by Alfred Creswell's party, who then counted nine men; but they had greatly the advantage of position, and it was to be supposed that they were in a better physical condition than their assailants, whose nerves must have suffered under the pressure of liquor and laudanum and the lack of proper food.

The four men, also, were well armed, three of them with hunting-rifles and pistols, and the fourth with a breech-loader, which was capable of doing execution at long range. Against these advantages might be offset the supposed greater skill of their adversaries, and the unwearied determination of Alfred Creswell.

It was soon evident that Mr. Creswell's men did not propose to throw away any of their lives in an attempt to carry the pass by assault. The two horses were tethered at a safe distance, and the men began to advance slowly and carefully toward the position of their foes, scattering on each side of the trail, and availing themselves of the cover of trees and rocks.

"By shiminy! dot vas glose!" exclaimed Herman Schweitopfel, as a bullet struck against a stone which he had just lifted to the top of the breastwork, and bits of lead spattered about his head.

"You may turn loose that yager of yours on them now," said Frank Mallory, who had been particular in requesting that no shot should be fired except in self-defense.

Herman gladly seized his rifle, and sighted through an opening in the breastwork which he had left for his own purposes, and watched his chance.

Soon a puff of smoke came from behind a tree down the trail, and he fired. The shot was followed by a yell, and the man who uttered the yell was seen to take flying leaps to a larger tree behind him.

"Dot feller vas got beeziness some oder place," remarked Herman, as he patted his rifle and inserted a fresh charge.

"Bully for you, Herman!" exclaimed Featherweight. "If you shoot center like that every time, we will be likely to take the starch out of those galoots."

"The shot was a fine one," said Mallory, "and it will teach them to be careful and keep their distance; but I am afraid that they mean to play a deep game, and one which may bother us pretty badly. I think they have an idea that they can keep us worried, without getting themselves hurt, and can finally wear us out and force us to run, when they hope to be close on our heels. Anyhow, they can hold us here until night, when they will have a better chance to sneak up to us. That knocks in the head my pleasant plan of finding a quiet resting-place for us to-night."

"Supposin' that to be their game, what can we do to break it up?" asked Fred Light.

"My only hope is in the night, too. We can hold them off, I believe, easily enough until dark. Then one of us must take a horse and get as far in the advance with Miss Creswell as possible, while the others stay here and keep up a show of fight to the last minute, and then for a lively scamper."

Mallory's prediction was at least partially verified by the conduct of the attacking party, who kept carefully under cover, and contented themselves with firing an occasional shot at the barricade, enough to put its defenders on the alert and compel them to exercise the quality of caution.

In the mean time, Herman and Jim Biggs, one at each end of the barricade, replied to the shots below with as much vigor as the attack demanded, while Mallory and Featherweight piled more stone upon the defenses, not so much for the purpose of protection, as with the hope of delaying their enemies when they should finally be compelled to take to flight.

These employments did not prevent them from taking time to consume a portion of the provisions they had provided for the journey, and Mallory went back every now and then to assure Sophie Creswell of their safety, and to give her hope of their final escape from their difficulties.

The greater part of the afternoon had passed in this sort of long-range warfare, no person having been hurt among the defenders of the pass, and no serious injury having been sustained, as far as they could discover, by their assailants.

It was then agreed that something must be done to break the monotony of the siege, if not to improve the position of the garrison, and Featherweight, in particular, was too restless to be kept quiet.

"Jest turn me loose, Mr. Mallory," he entreated, "and let me have a fair shy at those skunks. If I can't sneak out there, and get off to one side of 'em, and give 'em such a blizzard as will make 'em smell Hail Columby, you can have my head for a football."

"That will never do at all," replied Mallory. "We can't afford to lose you, my boy, at any price. If they should happen to put a hole through you, or should run you off out of our reach, we might as well give up the ghost."

"Then suppose you take Miss Sophie and light out, while the rest of us stay here to hold the fort. You can leave one of the horses for Herman, who is sorter slow on his legs. You can get miles away afore we have to run, and then you may bet high that our feet will save our heads."

"That is a very good plan, Featherweight; but the time has not yet come to put it in practice. Just now I have an idea which I think will worry them some."

He pointed at a little pinnacle of rock, some fifty feet above their heads, that stood out from the ragged face of the cliff.

"I think I can climb up there without being seen," he said, "and from that place I can put a few shots into those skunks that will surprise them."

"That would be jolly," exclaimed Featherweight. "But you had better let me try it. I am the lightest."

"No doubt; but I am at least as good a climber as you are, and probably a better shot. Besides, I don't propose that you shall have all the tough jobs to do. Step back with me a little way, and give me a boost to the first ledge."

With his rifle slung at his back, Mallory mounted to the ledge of which he had spoken, and then made his way upward and forward, climbing by the aid of the numerous projections of the cliff, which at the same time screened him from the view of the men down the road. In the position which he finally gained, he was covered by the rock, and was a little in advance of the barricade.

"Golly! don't I wish I was up there!" exclaimed Featherweight.

Mallory took a careful aim from his perch, and fired, while his friends below anxiously watched the effect of the shot.

It was followed by a yell, and three men who had previously been out of sight jumped up and ran for shelter.

Mallory reloaded his rifle; but, before he could fire again, he and his friends were startled by a shriek in the rear—a woman's shriek—a shriek of terrible fear or of mortal agony.

"Something has happened to Miss Creswell," said Featherweight, and he turned and ran down the pass to the rock behind which she had been concealed.

Frank Mallory, no longer anxious about his enemies, hastily slung his rifle, and retraced his steps to the bottom of the pass with all possible speed.

At that moment Alfred Creswell's men, angered by the unexpected blow that had been struck at them, opened a rapid and vicious fire upon the barricade and upon Frank Mallory, whose hurried descent exposed them to their view. Fortunately he was not struck, and Herman and Jim Biggs replied to the fire as vigorously as they could, while he descended and joined them.

It was then seen that this sudden attack was made to cover the removal of a man who had been killed or seriously wounded by Mallory's shot from above.

The firing was kept up, however, after the man had been carried away, and the young surveyor, expecting an immediate rush at the barricade, was unable to leave his post while his friends were in danger. The strain upon him was great; but he confided in Featherweight, who had gone to the assistance of Sophie Creswell.

As soon as the firing slackened he hastened to the place where he had left Sophie and the horses.

The horses were there, but Sophie Creswell had disappeared, and Fred Light was nowhere to be seen.

Mallory called them again and again at the top of his voice, but received no answer.

CHAPTER XII.

FEATHERWEIGHT ON THE TRAIL.

ALTHOUGH Featherweight had responded so speedily to Sophie Creswell's cry, he was not quick enough to ascertain the cause or manner of her disappearance.

At the place where she had been left the cliff was tall and almost perpendicular on one side; but on the other there was a break in the hill, where a small ravine or gully ran down to the pass. This ravine was steep and rocky,

but not so difficult as to prevent an active man from descending or ascending.

As the horses had not been removed, and as Miss Creswell would not have left the place of her own accord, it was plain that she had been carried away, and Featherweight's quick perception at once brought him to the conclusion that Alfred Creswell had sent a portion of his men around or over the hill to take the barricaders in the rear, while the others occupied their attention in front. If they had not been specially sent to capture Sophie, they had come upon her unexpectedly, and had picked her up as a matter of course.

These thoughts ran through the lad's head like a flash, and he did not stop a moment to consider about them. He called Sophie as soon as he reached the spot and heard a suppressed scream in response, which seemed to come from up the ravine. Then he knew that she had been carried off, and his plan of action was instantly formed.

It was all-important, it seemed to him, that he should follow the trail and keep her in sight if possible, or at least learn what was to become of her. He did not for a moment suppose that he would be able to effect her rescue single-handed; but he could not go back to tell his comrades of this calamity, nor could he wait for help.

There was no time even for thought. Instant and rapid action was wanted, and for that Featherweight was exactly fitted. At once he dashed up the ravine.

He had gone but a little way when he saw a fragment of lace hanging on a bush. He picked it up and recognized it as a fragment that had been torn from Sophie Creswell's dress, and he knew that he was on the right track.

He pushed his way up the rugged ravine as fast as he could, and wondered why he did not come in sight of the young lady and her captors. From the pass below came the sound of rapid and heavy firing, and he knew that his friends had their hands full.

The ravine terminated in a stretch of rolling upland, thickly covered with forest trees and undergrowth. When Featherweight came out into this reach of timber he paused to take breath and look around.

It was early dusk when he left the pass, and darkness had come on rapidly as he struggled up the ravine. In the forest it was so dark that no object was clearly visible at a greater distance than a few rods.

Yet, as he listened and looked, he caught the sound of retreating footsteps, and indistinctly saw a man running through the timber. Instantly he started in pursuit.

He soon perceived that he was gaining on the shadowy form that ran before him through the bushes and around the trees; but at the same time he doubted whether it was worth while to continue the pursuit, as he had got far enough to see that he was following only one man. As Miss Creswell evidently was not with that man, there was nothing to be gained by overtaking him.

Thoroughly enraged at the manner in which he had been foiled, Featherweight let his temper run away with his judgment and determined to give

the fellow he was chasing something to remember him by.

He halted, cocked his rifle and waited for a chance to shoot, but did not get the chance immediately, owing to the trees that were between him and his target. As soon as he thought he had a fair mark he fired at the dark form.

The shot was followed by a screech, and the man disappeared.

Struck with remorse, because he believed that he had taken life unnecessarily, the youth ran forward. When he reached the spot where he expected to see a corpse, he found himself standing on the edge of a steep slope, thickly covered with bushes and small trees.

Darkness and silence were down there, and he neither saw nor heard any human being.

He turned away with an exclamation of disgust.

"Durn their mis'able hides and heads!" he muttered. "They've played sharp on me this time, sure pop. They split when they got up out o' the gully, and part of 'em struck off with the girl, while that feller run on to lead me on a wild-goose chase. I hope he has broke his blamed neck, dod rot him!"

There was nothing for the baffled trailer to do then but to retrace his steps to the head of the ravine, where he stopped and considered what course he should take.

It was clear enough that whoever had charge of Miss Creswell must have turned to the left after leaving the ravine, as the opposite direction would take them to the pass. It was also probable that after they had thrown their pursuer off the track, they would follow the same general course as that which was taken by the man whom Featherweight had chased, as he and they must be supposed to be aiming to reach the same point in the end.

Having settled this much in his mind, and having put a fresh charge in his rifle, the lad struck into the forest.

After going a short distance in a line that would take him directly away from the pass, he turned to the right, desiring to pursue a course nearly parallel with that which he had taken in his recent fruitless chase.

By that time night had fairly settled down upon the forest, and the darkness was so deep as to be oppressive. Featherweight did not pretend to be an expert woodsman, and he was badly disheartened by the troublesome combination of doubt and darkness. But he knew what he intended to try to do, and he thought, as he had his bearings pretty well settled in his head, that he would be able to keep the course which he desired to follow.

But it is no easy matter, even on open and level ground, to pursue in utter darkness a straight course toward any object, and the task becomes vastly more difficult in a rocky or hilly region, crowded with trees and beset with vines and bushes.

When Featherweight had run against a number of trees, had crossed two or three ravines, and found himself on the side of a steep hill, entangled in a mass of blackberry bushes, he fully realized the difficulty of his undertaking. The question with him then was, not whether

he should succeed in finding Sophie Creswell, but whether he would ever be able to get out of that forest and make his way to his friends.

He had believed that the course which he endeavored to take, if he could follow it, would finally bring him to Alfred Creswell's camp; but he was then compelled to admit that he was quite unable to decide whether he was following that course or going in the opposite direction. In fact, he was completely bewildered.

The steep incline down which he had tumbled into the mass of blackberry bushes gave him an idea.

It was on the edge of just such a hill that he had stopped after he had noted the disappearance of the man he had shot at. If this should be the same hill, he was on the right track, and need only keep on as he was going.

At all events, it was necessary to move in some direction, and he made his way down the hill as well as he could, though the briars that beset his course not only hindered him, but caused him serious discomfort.

He was glad enough when he got out of that mess of bushes and rocks and darkness, and found himself in a forest which, although dense and dark enough, was comparatively free from other annoyances.

If he had really stumbled upon the right course, he believed that he must be then somewhere in the neighborhood of Alfred Creswell's camp. If so, it would be necessary to move cautiously, lest he should also stumble into the midst of his enemies.

He had good reason to suppose that by this time Sophie Creswell was in the power of her uncle, and surrounded by his allies. In that case he could not hope, at the best, to do more than discover her whereabouts, and open communication with his friends when daylight should disclose to him his real position.

At last, as he was carefully making his way through the dark forest, trying to hold the same general course which he had taken at the head of the ravine, he saw a faint light shining through the trees.

As he drew nearer, he was sure that it was no imaginary light. It came from a fire which as yet he could not see, though its reflection was almost brilliant by contrast with the surrounding darkness.

Drawing yet nearer, he heard voices and an occasional boisterous laugh, and knew that he was near a camp. It could be no other than the camp of Alfred Creswell's followers, and he was thankful that all his doubts and tribulations had brought him so near to the desired end.

Not a thought of personal danger entered his mind; but he knew that he must be very wary if he was to accomplish anything for the benefit of Sophie Creswell. His step was lighter, and he grasped his rifle more firmly, as he felt that the time of doubt and wandering was at an end, and that prompt and vigorous action might be called for at any moment.

When he had walked as far as he dared, he crawled to the top of a low ridge, from which position he could look down on the camp.

The fire was burning low, and the remains of food showed that Mr. Creswell's men had ceased to live on whisky alone, and were supplied with

more substantial nourishment. He counted only eight in the party, and judged that the missing man was the one who had been struck by Frank Mallory's bullet, or the one who had disappeared after his own shot in the forest. Facing him sat Alfred Creswell, who seemed to be in a very good humor, and was talking and laughing with the others.

"They are laughing at that sharp game they played on me," muttered Featherweight.

But the most interesting object he saw was Sophie Creswell, who was seated on the ground, with her back against a tree. Her arms seemed to be tied at their elbows, and her hands were folded as if in prayer. Her uncle occasionally turned his face to her, and appeared to speak to her; but she took no notice of him.

Featherweight crawled over the ridge, and silently circled around the camp, until he came as close to Sophie Creswell as he dared to go. There he concealed himself in a clump of bushes and watched and waited.

It was a tedious vigil. The men in the camp gradually placed themselves in attitudes for sleep, and Featherweight grew drowsy. He had not had his fair allowance of sleep of late, and his toilsome tramp in the woods had wearied him. Besides, he was hungry, and sleep is in a measure a substitute for food. He fought against his inclination for slumber, and fully believed that he could overcome it; but he dropped off, in spite of himself.

He awoke from an exciting dream, in which he had been struggling with Alfred Creswell over the body of Sophie, and for a time he did not know where he was or how he had got there.

Gradually a knowledge of his position and of the events of the night came to him. He could not judge how long he had slept; but the night was so dark that it reminded him of that "darkest hour before day" when he and his friends had crossed the swamp near the river.

He crawled out from under the bushes and peered about. The silence was as intense as the darkness. He could still see that all the men in the camp were asleep, with the exception of one who had been set to keep watch, and who was stationed near Sophie Creswell.

This man was evidently restless, and was muttering to himself. At last he spoke plainly.

"Durned if I kin stand this any longer," he said. "My coppers are blazin' hot, and I must have a drink of cold water outen that spring."

He leaned his gun against a tree, and walked briskly away from the camp, passing close to where Featherweight was lying.

The lad saw his chance, and hastened to improve it. He took off his coat, held it by the sleeves, and wrapped the body around the neck until it was a roll. Then he swiftly and silently followed the thirteent sentinel.

The man walked down into a little hollow, where the dripping of water could be heard as it fell from a rock. He stopped at the spring, and knelt down to take a drink. Behind him, like his shadow, crouched Featherweight.

As he raised his head his unseen foe threw the rolled coat over his face, drawing it tightly across his mouth, and at the same time catch-

ing a knot in the sleeves behind his head. The next instant he had turned him on his face, and was pressing his left knee against the small of his back.

"Keep quiet," muttered the lad, "or I will blow your brains out!"

The man was so surprised and stunned by this sudden attack, that he had not sense enough to begin to make a struggle, until Featherweight had snatched a bandana handkerchief from his pocket, and had tied his hands behind his back. Then the youth made his gag secure, and leisurely proceeded to tear a strip from his victim's hickory shirt and tie his feet. He then rolled the man on his side, to make him more comfortable, and hastened back to the camp.

Crawling up to the tree against which the young lady was seated, he saw that her head was drooped, as if she was asleep. He touched her slightly, and whispered her name.

"Sophie! Miss Creswell!"

She started, and raised her head.

"Don't say a word. It is I—Featherweight—and I am goin' to cut you loose."

With his pocket-knife he severed the cord that bound her elbows, and she felt that she was free.

"Get up now, miss, and be as quiet as a cat, and come to me."

She rose, and silently moved away from the camp, holding her dress that it would not rustle.

"Not a word now," whispered Featherweight as he joined her, and he picked up his rifle, gave her his hand, and led her away through the forest.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SMART GAME SPOILED.

FRANK MALLORY had only partially guessed at the designs of his enemies. He had not given Alfred Creswell the full credit that he deserved for enterprise and determination.

The arrival of Doc Terry and Jack Sessions had been of great benefit to the man from Memphis. With the aid of these men he had been able to keep his party well in hand, and had started an active pursuit of the fugitives. Terry and Sessions were thoroughly acquainted with the country, and at the houses of their friends supplies were procured, not only of liquor, but of provisions, of which even Kaintuck and his comrades began to feel the need.

When they found Mallory and his friends intrenched and prepared to resist them, Alfred Creswell was not disposed to force the fighting, and his allies were quite of the same opinion. It was decided that they should do nothing but hold the barricades where they were until night, when they would be better able to attack them under the cover of darkness.

Though Mr. Creswell had proposed this plan, he was not fully satisfied with it. He wanted to do something more, to make the capture of his niece no longer a question of doubt. In this desire he was seconded by Jack Sessions, who had a bitter grudge against Frank Mallory, and by Kaintuck, who was anxious to come to a settlement with Featherweight.

Accordingly, when he asked if it would not be possible to get in the rear of the barricades,

Sessions eagerly caught up the suggestion, and offered to lead a party through the hills, so as to get beyond the pass, or to strike it at about the middle.

The latter course was favored by Mr. Creswell, who thought it quite possible that his niece might have been placed for safety at a convenient distance from the barricade, and that he might be able to come upon her unawares.

This was exactly what had occurred.

When he and Kaintuck, guided by Jack Sessions, had passed over the hills and through the woods, into the ravine that led down to the pass, they moved with all possible silence and caution, so as to avoid discovery.

They had nearly reached the foot of the ravine, when they caught sight of Sophie, half lying down behind a rock. Her long travel and loss of sleep had made her weary, and, as all was quiet at the barricade, she had yielded to her desire for slumber. Frank Mallory had come down to visit her, but, finding her asleep, had quietly gone away.

This was Alfred Creswell's opportunity, and he whispered to Kaintuck to slip down and seize the girl and bring her away.

Kaintuck, who was as active as a cat and nearly as soft-footed, carried out this instruction to the letter; but his movements were not too silent to awake the girl who uttered a scream as she opened her eyes and saw him bending over her.

Instantly he stopped her mouth with his big hand, and, with the assistance of Jack Sessions, carried her up the ravine.

As they stopped to take breath, she heard Featherweight call her name, and tried to answer him; but they tied a handkerchief over her mouth, and partly carried and partly dragged her up to the head of the ravine.

At this point they halted, and the sound of footsteps and the rattling of stones below told them that they were pursued.

"The gal's screech has woke 'em up, and they are arter us," said Jack Sessions. "We can't well fight 'em off with her to bother us, and must throw 'em off the trail. Run straight ahead, Kaintuck, and head for the camp, while we swing around with the gal."

If they had known that Featherweight was alone on their trail, this precaution would not have been necessary; but they had no means of judging the number of their pursuers.

Kaintuck found his task an uncomfortable one. When Featherweight's bullet whizzed by his head, it startled him so that he fell over the edge of a slope, and rolled down among the bushes, which scratched him pretty badly. He lay where he had fallen, and kept under the cover of the bushes until he had reason to believe that the pursuit had been abandoned. Then he made his way to the camp.

Directly after he came in, Mr. Creswell and Sessions arrived with Sophie, and were congratulated upon the success of their enterprise. The only thing to mar their pleasure was the fact that during their absence one of the men enlisted by Kaintuck had been shot dead by an unexpected bullet from the pass; but Kaintuck, when he learned who the dead man was, remarked that

they could get along very well without him, and that he was not likely to be seriously missed by anybody anywhere.

They sat around their camp-fire, eating and drinking, and laughing and boasting of the neat manner in which they had outwitted the pursuers who were supposed to have followed them up the ravine. If they had known that Featherweight was still on their trail, vowing vengeance for that trick, how they would have hastened to hunt him down!

Alfred Creswell congratulated himself upon his successful exploit, and said that he was ready to return to the river, as the object of his expedition had been accomplished; but some of the others were not so easily satisfied.

"Durned if I shall want to go back," said Kaintuck, "ontil I kin git a chance to lay my claws on that sprightly young scamp who calls himself Featherweight."

"For my part," said Jack Sessions, "I've got a crow to pick with that feller Mallory, and don't believe I will ever find a better chance than this."

"It is my opinion that neither of you will be starved for a chance," said Mr. Creswell. "Unless I am mistaken in my notions about that man and that boy, we will see a good deal more of them before we get back to the Mississippi. The tables are turned, that's all, and they will be hunting us, rather than hunted by us. That will give us the advantage, and I hope we know how to use it."

As for Sophie Creswell, she burst into a paroxysm of tears when she found herself in the camp and completely within the power of her uncle; but she soon recovered from this and held up her head bravely, determined to resist him to the last extremity.

"You are going back to Memphis with me, Sophie," he said. "Will you go peaceably, or must I take you as a prisoner?"

"I will not go a step with you unless I am forced to go," she replied, "and I will not remain with you a moment longer than I am compelled to."

"You speak plainly enough, young woman, and I have no doubt that you mean what you say. That being the case, I shall be obliged to fix you so that you will not be likely to get away from me."

He gave effect to his threat by tying her arms at the elbows. Then, after seeing to the selection of a camp-guard he lay down upon the ground and slept the sleep of the weary, if not the sleep of the just.

The night was nearly gone when he awoke with a start from a troubled slumber, in which he had dreamed that his niece had again escaped from his clutches.

He looked at the place where he had left her, but she was no longer there. He called the camp guard, but no person answered.

He sprung to his feet and aroused his slumbering companions, who sleepily and angrily wanted to know what was the matter.

"Matter enough," he replied. "The girl is missing and so is the camp guard. What has been going on here?"

Kaintuck and the others bestirred themselves and called Wilson, the camp guard, but not even

echo answered them. Sophie was sought, but could not be found. The cord that had bound her arms was lying at the base of the tree, showing the clean cut of a sharp knife.

"I know who has done thls," said Kaintuck, with an oath. "It is that infernal young seed of a Featherweight. The 'squire has lost the game that he thought he had safe in his hands, an' I will have another chance to git squar' with that lively young limb."

"And I will have a chance to cut the comb of that Mallory rooster," remarked Jack Sessions.

"To judge by the style of their work that we have lately seen," remarked Alfred Creswell, "you will both be likely to get enough of them before you are through with them."

The camp guard was soon found. One of the men, who was suffering with the same affliction of "hot coppers" that had brought Wilson into trouble, went down to the spring and discovered him there, bound and gagged, and glad to be released.

Although he had not seen Featherweight, his account of the difficulty made it plain who his assailant had been, and Alfred Creswell was anxious to start at once in pursuit of that young marauder.

"Wait till daylight," said Kaintuck. "It is near day now, and I am willin' to sw'ar that I kin take up the trail as soon as it is light enough to see, and foller it like a hound."

He was as good as his word. With the first flush of dawn he "lifted" the trail, and started off nearly at a lope, followed by his comrades.

It was about an hour after sunrise when they came in sight of Featherweight and Sophie Creswell, who had stopped to rest where two sharp hills came together, forming a narrow pass that opened upon a clearing beyond.

"Thar's them!" shouted Kaintuck. "Come on, boys! We've got 'em now!"

Featherweight heard the cry, and saw the pack of human bloodhounds pressing on in pursuit. Looking through the pass, his quick glance also saw some shadowy forms moving in the timber at the other side of the clearing.

"You are safe!" he exclaimed. "Run on, Miss Sophie, and I will keep those wolves back until you can cross the clearing."

"But what will become of you?" she asked, hesitating.

"Never mind me. I am right. Run, for your life!"

She ran, and Featherweight sunk down behind a clump of bushes.

Frank Mallory was bewildered by the sudden disappearance of Sophie Creswell and his young friend. He perceived that his enemies had played a bold and successful game, and he had good cause to fear that he would not be able to defeat it. His only consolation for the moment was found in the fact that Featherweight had followed Sophie; but what could the boy do against such odds?

He hastened back to the barricade, and reported the position of affairs to his friends. Jim Biggs was depressed by the news, but Herman Schweitopf took a more cheerful view of the trouble.

"Dot girrel vas been auf taken," he re-

marked, "oond dot boy, he go auf mit dot girrel."

"So I suppose," said Mallory. "But what can the boy do?"

"Dot boy? He do blendy dings."

"Talk is cheap, Herman; but I am half crazy about this business, and don't know what to do. My plans have been upset, and I am all adrift."

"I dellys you vot ve s'all do. Ve goes by dot boy."

"What do you mean?"

"Herman is right," said Jim Biggs. "Part of those scamps have come in our rear, and have carried off Miss Creswell. Featherweight knows this, and has followed them. The boy will be where she is, and we must be where both of them are. Of course they have taken her to their camp, and we must go there to find her."

"They will be watching us," remarked Mallory.

"Yes, at this end of the pass, but not at the other. We must go around and strike them in the rear, as they struck us."

"Dot vas alles recht," remarked Herman.

As Jim Biggs considered himself able to guide the party at night, and as there was nothing else to be done, his plan was adopted. He led them to the foot of the pass, where he struck off into the hills and the woods.

The way was long, the hills were rough, the forest was dense, and the night was dark. So it was not surprising that in the course of the tramp the guide lost his bearings, and was finally compelled to confess that he did not know where he was, or what direction he ought to take.

"We will have to stop where we are for a while," he said, "and we may as well get as good a snooze as we can until daylight. When the sun rises I will know what chute to take."

As there was nothing to be gained by wandering about blindly, they rested until daylight, when they pushed forward briskly, as Jim Biggs declared that he was then sure of his course.

They were passing through a stretch of heavy timber, just before reaching an old clearing, when a sudden cry from Frank Mallory brought the party to a halt.

"There she is!" he exclaimed. "As sure as I live, there is Miss Creswell!"

"Dot vas dot Feddervate, too, already, by shimminy!" said Herman.

Looking across the clearing, they saw Sophie Creswell start from the mouth of a narrow pass between two hills, and run toward them.

"They are pursued!" said Mallory. "Now for sharp work with the rifles!"

He pressed forward through the timber to meet Sophie, followed by Jim Biggs and Herman; but Featherweight was no longer to be seen.

CHAPTER XIV.

FEATHERWEIGHT'S PERIL.

WHEN Fred Light sunk down behind a clump of bushes in the narrow pass, he had a simple and desperate plan. At all hazards he meant to try to delay the pursuit, so as to give Sophie Creswell a chance to meet her friends.

He did not for a moment suppose that his task would be so easy and safe as the experiment he had tried in the swamp. Indeed, it seemed to him that the result could not fail to be ruinous to himself; but that was a matter which gave him little concern. He only thought of what he could do to harm Sophie Creswell's enemies.

"Shoot 'em! Shoot 'em!" howled Kaintuck, as his long strides carried him swiftly toward the pass.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Alfred Creswell, who was panting in the rear. "Whatever you do, don't hurt her!"

As Kaintuck came rushing into the pass, his leg was suddenly seized at the ankle, and he fell headlong among the stones and bushes that nearly blocked up the way. The man who came immediately after him tumbled over him, and those behind were compelled to pause until their fallen comrades could recover their footing.

As Kaintuck struggled to his feet, cursing savagely, he was again thrown down, and the man who had fallen over him received a blow between the eyes that sent him to the stones again.

The others, seeing that it was Featherweight who was making this mischief, rushed forward with yells of rage, and piled themselves upon the youth, who had not attempted to use any weapons, but those with which nature had provided him.

He struggled desperately, and contrived to get in a few blows that damaged his antagonists pretty badly; but he was largely overmatched in numbers and in weight, and at the same time his arms were seized from behind in the brawny grasp of Kaintuck.

"I've got you at last, you young limb of Satan!" exclaimed that rough of the backwoods. "Now I've got you foul, and you'll have to pay up for the old and the new!"

"Yes, we will settle with him, whatever happens!" exclaimed Alfred Creswell, glaring viciously at the lad as he came up.

They tied his hands tightly at the wrists, and led him through the pass to the edge of the clearing, which was bordered with post-oaks and blackjack.

Featherweight looked across the clearing, and perceived that his desperate struggle in the pass had given Sophie Creswell time to reach her friends, and with this result he was satisfied. He caught sight of her for an instant, and then she disappeared in the timber with Mallory.

Of course her friends would know what he had done for her, and would recognize the danger of his position, and would do their best to help him. But what could they do, except sacrifice their lives and her liberty? If he had been able to warn them, he would have advised them to escape while they could, and make the best use of their time; but he was bound, and could not even motion to them, though it was plain that they did not intend to leave him to his fate.

Alfred Creswell also saw Sophie as she disappeared in the timber, and favored an immediate pursuit.

"We will leave the boy here," he said. "We

must tie him to a tree, and hurry over there to catch my niece."

"She won't git fur away," replied Kaintuck. "You needn't be afraid about her, 'squire. We hav got those galoots nigh about treed, and kin pick 'em up when we want em. But we will tie the boy to a tree, and tie him so as he won't git away, too."

"What do you mean?" asked the man from Memphis, who saw a cruel meaning in the savage twinkle of Kaintuck's eyes.

Kaintuck replied by putting his hand to his neck, with a significant twist of his thumb and finger.

"I mean to tie him up so," he said, "to string him up safe, in such a shape that the job will never hav to be done ag'in."

"Do you mean to hang him?" asked Mr. Creswell, who had not expected to carry his revenge to such an extreme. "I supposed that we would tie him up and give him a good strapping, to teach him better behavior."

"If anybody ever deserved hangin', 'squire, that young cub deserves it now. Hain't he 'saulted and battered me, an honest and peaceable citizen? Didn't he j'ine in to p'izen us? Didn't he try to drown me in the swamp? Didn't he half-smother Bill Wilson last night? Didn't he try to break my neck jest now? Hain't he been guilty of the wu'st kind of tryin' to murder? In course he has, and hangin' is only too good fur him. Ain't it, boys?"

Jack Sessions and Doc Terry were decidedly of Kaintuck's opinion, and said that they only wished that they might swing Frank Mallory up to the same tree.

"Go ahead, then," said the man from Memphis; "but you must be responsible for this."

Kaintuck declared that they were just the sort who were fully willing to be held responsible, and he proceeded to select a suitable tree for the performance which was to afford him so much pleasure.

"You bet I go fixed," he said, in answer to a question as to where he expected to find a rope, and he unwound from his body a small but stout line, in which he carefully tied a noose, looking at the lad as if measuring him for a necktie.

Featherweight was apparently unmoved as he viewed these serious preparations, except that his face, which had been flushed by his recent hard struggle, was deathly pale. But there was no flinching in his undaunted eyes, and his tightly-closed lips did not quiver.

He had not supposed that he was so near death, and he would not have chosen, in any event, such a death as his captors were preparing for him. He was so young, too, so healthy and hopeful, and so full of life and vigor. It was hard to be strung up to that tree, and to die such a cruel and painful death. He could hardly realize that it was to be. He knew that while there was life there was hope, and nothing but the cold grasp of death itself could quench his last spark of confidence.

"How do you like the looks of it, young 'un?" inquired Kaintuck, as he dangled his finished noose before the lad's face.

"I ain't afraid," calmly replied Featherweight, between his clinched teeth.

"You ain't bey? Never l'arnt what you ort to be afear'd of, I reckon. Wal, you will never git a better chance to l'arn, and the lesson will be apt to stick, too. You won't never need another. Are you anyways partic'lar in your ch'ice of a tree? That branch over your head looks to me like the right thing; but mebbe you're too high-toned to want to swing on a post-oak."

Featherweight said nothing.

"Mebbe you'd like to hit me another clip, or to p'izen me, or to tumble me into the water, or to fling me down on the rocks."

"You are a heap bigger than I am," replied the lad; "but I would like to be turned loose and have it out with you in a fair stand-up fight."

"Mebbe you would; but we don't allow to turn you loose in that way. We know somethin' about what you kin do when you're turned loose. Jest lemme see how this thing fits."

Kaintuck slipped his noose over the lad's head and drew it tight enough to send the blood rushing up into his face.

"Kinder burns, does it? It'll burn a heap wuss'n that mighty soon. Bill Wilson, supposin' you shin up that tree, and pass this rope over the branch, and give us the eend of it."

"Wait a second," said one of Kaintuck's comrades. "This young cuss gobbled my rifle, night afore last, and I must levy on his pistol."

He took Featherweight's revolver from his hip pocket, transferred it to his own belt, and grinning maliciously as he stared at the helpless victim.

Bill Wilson, the camp guard whom Featherweight had surprised at the spring, was well pleased with the task that had been confided to him, and hastened to climb the tree and make his way out upon the stout branch that had been pointed out to him.

"Ketch the line, now," said Kaintuck, "and pass it over a smooth place, so's we kin run this rooster up quick and easy."

Wilson caught the rope, and drew it over the branch.

Featherweight cast his eyes upward for an instant, and his lips moved slightly. Then he glanced across the clearing at the timber in which his friends were supposed to be concealed. Did they realize the perilous position in which he was placed and the cruel fate that was intended for him? If so, would they not make an effort to save him?

As he looked, he saw a small puff of white smoke and a quick flash of fire issue from the side of one of the trees, and he thought of Herman Schweitopf's long-range German rifle.

The report was drowned in the cry of the man on the limb, and then followed a horrible thud as the man fell heavily on the moist ground at his side, quivering in his last agonies. The bullet had gone through his brain, and he would never assist at another hanging.

Since his capture Featherweight had not ceased to tug at the bandage with which his hands were tied behind his back. He had succeeded in moving his wrists quite freely, and was sure that his hands could pass where his wrists could.

When Wilson fell dead at his feet, he gave a violent wrench, and his hands were free!

While the men about him were staring blankly, almost stunned by the sudden and tragical interruption of their pastime, he dashed at the man who faced him, and snatched from his belt his own pistol.

It was a self-cocker, and he fired it instantly at the foes before him—once, twice, thrice—and then turned and ran like a deer.

CHAPTER XV.

SAFE AT LAST.

FEATHERWEIGHT ran like a deer, but not across the clearing, and not in the direction of his friends.

His thoughts, like his deeds, were as quick as the lightning's flash, and it had at once occurred to him that in the clearing he would be a fair mark for the bullets of his foes. Therefore he struck off through the timber, knowing that he would be quite as likely to escape in that direction, and that the trees would lessen his chances of being hit.

Each of his pistol-shots had told. Though his impuse had been so sudden, and his firing so rapid, his purpose had been deadly, and his aim had been true. He had not a thought of mercy toward the wretches who were about to murder him in cold blood.

The man from whom he had snatched the pistol had been the first to fall, with a bullet in his breast; the second was struck in the shoulder and the third in the head.

Thus there were but four of Alfred Creswell's party left in fighting condition—himself, Kaintuck, Doc Terry and Jack Sessions.

When these four looked upon their fallen comrades, dead, or seriously wounded, they were astonished at the suddenness with which the tables had been turned upon them, and at the damage that had been done.

For a few moments they were incapable of action. Then the sight of the flying form of Featherweight recalled them to their senses. They raised their rifles and fired at him, and at once started in pursuit. Even Alfred Creswell for awhile forgot his rebellious niece in his desire for vengeance.

But their shots were fired hastily, and the eccentric manner in which Featherweight doubled among the trees disturbed the aim of his enemies.

Nor were they more successful in their pursuit. Although wearied and weakened by a long tramp, and by the lack of food and sleep, the lad was sound in wind and limb and well able to hold his own in a foot-race. He intended to keep in the cover of the timber, and thus circle around its edge toward his friends, hoping that his pursuers would not try to cross the clearing and cut him off.

They made no such attempt, and he would easily have distanced them if he had not tripped against a vine and fallen over a log.

When he endeavored to rise, he found himself unable to do so. His ankle had been so badly sprained that it would not bear his weight.

As he could neither run nor crawl away, he must stay there and meet his fate; but it was still possible to interfere with the purposes of his pursuers, and he meant to hurt some of them before they could end his career.

From the shelter of the log he took careful aim with his pistols at the first man who came bounding through the timber.

Frank Mallory and his comrades had not failed to see the capture of Featherweight, or to note the preparations that were made to put an end to his life.

As soon as he had placed Sophie Creswell in a position of safety, the surveyor hastened to the edge of the timber, and saw Kaintuck knotting the rope with which he meant to hang the lad. Featherweight had taken such a hold upon his heart, that the lad's life was as dear to him as his own.

"The infernal hounds!" he exclaimed. "They are going to hang him. We must stop that, boys, if it takes all our lives."

"All right, as far as the lives go," calmly replied Jim Biggs; "but we would only throw them away, by trying to run across that clearing, where they would shoot us down before we could get near the boy."

"But we can run around, or I can. If I should fail to do my best to save him, I would never forgive myself."

"That may be of some use but you must be quick about it," said Biggs. "If you can stir them up on that side, it will give us a chance to make a dash from here."

"Dot yager might go himself off oond hurt somebody yet, already," said Herman, who had stationed himself behind a tree, with his rifle leveled and steadied against the trunk.

Mallory stopped only to say a word to Sophie.

"For God's sake, go!" she entreated. "That brave and noble boy must not die, whatever becomes of the rest of us."

"Take my pistol, Sophie, and defend yourself, if it comes to the worst."

"Kiss me, and go!" she answered, as she took the pistol.

Mallory darted away, with his rifle in his hand, and was quickly lost to her sight.

It was soon plain that he would arrive too late to help the boy. Kaintuck had fitted the rope to Featherweight's neck, and a man was climbing a tree for a purpose that could easily be guessed.

"See there!" exclaimed Jim Biggs. "They are going to swing him off right away. We must make a rush now!"

"Yoost you geeps quiet," replied Herman. "De yager vas lookin' at dose beeblees."

Again he squinted along the barrel of his rifle, and pulled the trigger. The report was instantly followed by the fall of the man who had climbed the tree.

Jim Biggs had not time to admire the effect of this admirable shot, when he was astonished at seeing Featherweight dash forward, fire right and left and then dash off through the timber.

"I must run and help him now," he said. "No use talking. Stay here, Herman, and take care of Miss Creswell."

"Aber I dinks I know mine beeznees," quietly remarked Herman, as he shoved another cartridge into his rifle. "Coom on, Mees Creswell! Coom on! I dakes gare mit you. Ve vhipps dem all now, by shiminy!"

He did not follow in the route taken by Frank Mallory, or in the footsteps of Jim Biggs, but struck out boldly into the clearing, aiming to cut off Featherweight's pursuers, and leaving Sophie Creswell to wonder and stare at the exciting events that had developed so suddenly.

Fred Light, in the mean time, resting behind his log, with his teeth clinched and his nerves steady, calmly awaited the onset of his adversaries.

The first to come in sight was Doc Terry, whose rush was stopped by a bullet from the boy's pistol. He staggered, threw up his hands and fell backward.

The next was Kaintuck, at whom Featherweight snapped his pistol in vain, for he had not a load left. With a savage yell, Kaintuck ran on; but his foot caught in the same vine that had tripped up the lad, and he tumbled headlong over the log. At once he was seized in Featherweight's sinewy arms, and the lad's active limbs were coiled about him in a resolute wrestle.

Jack Sessions, running up to assist his comrade, was met by a summons to surrender. Turning, he found himself faced by Frank Mallory with a leveled rifle.

The rifle missed fire, and Sessions, drawing a knife, rushed upon the man he hated. With a dexterous stroke of his rifle Frank struck the knife from his hand, and the two men clinched.

Alfred Creswell, who was the only man left who possessed an effective weapon, cocked his pistol, and hastened forward to put an end to the struggle between Sessions and Mallory; but the bodies of the men were so twisted together as they rolled on the ground, that it was not easy to find a chance to fire. As he eagerly sought the chance he wanted, he was seized from behind by Jim Biggs, thrown to the ground and disarmed.

"You vas besser yoost get oop ofen dis," remarked Herman Schweitopf, as he seized Kaintuck by the collar, and dragged him loose from Featherweight.

Herman had taken a short cut, and had reached the spot just in time to relieve the lad, who was completely exhausted and no longer able to resist his heavy antagonist.

Jim Biggs had in the mean time tapped Jack Sessions on the head with Mr. Creswell's pistol, hard enough to put him out of fighting condition for a time.

"Do you want any more, you folks?" asked Mallory; "or are you willing to say that this game shall stop now?"

Kaintuck plainly admitted that he had had enough. Alfred Creswell hung his head, and said nothing.

"I think you ought to be satisfied," said Mallory. "Some of you must be dead, and others are serioufly hurt, and the man who brought you into this scrape is badly out of pocket. It seems to me that there is nothing left for you to do but to pick up the fragments and go home. We are going our way, and we mean that you shall not molest us any more. So we will trouble you for any weapons you may happen to have about you."

As Kaintuck was thoroughly cowed, all the

pistols and knives that remained in the possession of Alfred Creswell's party were taken from them by the victors, and their rifles were broken against trees, and Jim Biggs brought away as a relic the rope that had come so near being fatal to Featherweight. Then Mallory and Herman picked up the lad, and carried him across the clearing to where Sophie Creswell was anxiously awaiting their return.

Three days after the last of these events had occurred, Fred Light was seated on the veranda of a substantial farm-house in Southwestern Missouri, viewing his bandaged ankle as it reposed on a cushion. Near him were standing Frank Mallory and his wife, lately Sophie Creswell, and over him was hovering Frank's mother, who delighted in taking care of her son's faithful friend.

"I hope you won't think it hard of me if I say that I want to go away," said Featherweight; "but I oughtn't to stay here and pet up a little sprain as if I was a baby."

"We have the best reason to believe that you are no baby," replied Frank. "Nothing would please us better than that you should consider this place as your home."

"That's all right; but I am kinder restless, and want to light out and make a strike for myself."

Sophie assured him that they would help him to make any sort of a "strike" he wanted to make, when he got strong enough to "light out."

"But do stay here until your ankle is thoroughly well," entreated Mrs. Mallory the elder. "You must not think that because Frank and Sophie are now rid of all their troubles, you must be in a hurry to run away and leave them."

"As for that," replied the lad, "I ain't so sure that they are rid of all their troubles. That man from Memphis has got the Old Boy in him as big as any chap that ever wore boots. It was property that he was after, and he means business, every time."

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